

# national news

## Checking in

*Deaf gay men and lesbians meet at Seattle conference to learn, share and celebrate*

by Inga Sorensen

**M**ore than 120 deaf gay men and lesbians attended the 5th Biennial Deaf Gays and Lesbians of the West (Deaf GLOW) Conference held July 11-13 in Seattle.

The event, whose theme was "Growing Together Toward Equality," was designed to bring together deaf, hard-of-hearing and deaf-blind sexual minorities from states west of the Mississippi River.

"[Participants] came to learn and celebrate their pride and their unique culture. Much of [their] focus was directed from the knowledge that there is a growing need to understand their roles and legal standing as deaf lesbians," explains Karen Atwood, Deaf GLOW chairwoman and president of the Northwest Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, which serves members from Oregon, Washington and Vancouver, B.C.

"Through sharing their knowledge and sto-

According to Atwood, the duo are "two of the most outstanding gay and lesbian leaders in the deaf community."

Workshop titles included "An Introduction to the Internet," "Deaf Leather S/M Safe Sex," "Deaf and Hearing Gay Cultures: What is the Difference?" and "The Gay Bridge Between Deaf and Deaf-Blind People."

Portland resident Hank Stack was among the presenters, and led a workshop entitled "The Difference in Cultures: Deaf, Hearing and Gay."

Stack says he previously interviewed about 60 deaf gay men with the idea of publishing a book on the subject. He summarized the findings from those in-depth interviews for his workshop.

"In a nutshell, deaf people learn to live in two distinct cultures," Stack tells *Just Out*. "Deaf gays must also do that, plus adapt to the hearing gay subculture as well as their own subgroup.... We have our feet in four distinct

deaf people," he continues. "As a deaf gay, you learn to withhold information from others in the deaf community."

Additionally, Stack says members of the broader deaf community often learn to distrust the hearing world (prompted by oppression and a lack of power) while deaf gays learn to trust hearing gays and often "look upon them as part of their extended families rather than outsiders."

Stack also says there is "very little meaningful socialization between the deaf community and the hearing world [while] the reverse is true in the deaf/gay subgroup."

According to Atwood, conference attendees discussed many topics including how to become politically active, domestic violence within the sexual minorities community, gay male relationships, and erotic safer sex for lesbians.

A tribute was held in remembrance of NWRAD and Deaf GLOW member Allen Forbes, who died last spring of AIDS complications. A Quilt Display Room was open to participants, and included photos and mementos of loved ones lost to the disease, as well as a signature quilt for those who wanted to write a message of remembrance.

"It was a room for quietness, for prayers, for memories and for mediation," says Atwood.

The conference had its more carefree moments, too.

"Seattle is home to many popular performers and actors in the deaf community," she says.

Among the performers were Nat Wilson, who toured with the National Theatre of the Deaf and now teaches in Seattle; Marilyn Smith, an actress and founder of Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services in Seattle, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary; and Jer Loudenback, who also toured with the National Theatre of the Deaf and Northwest Theatre of the Deaf. He currently is a teacher at the Washington School for the Deaf in Vancouver, Wash. Also on hand was deaf drag queen Gerry Reyes,

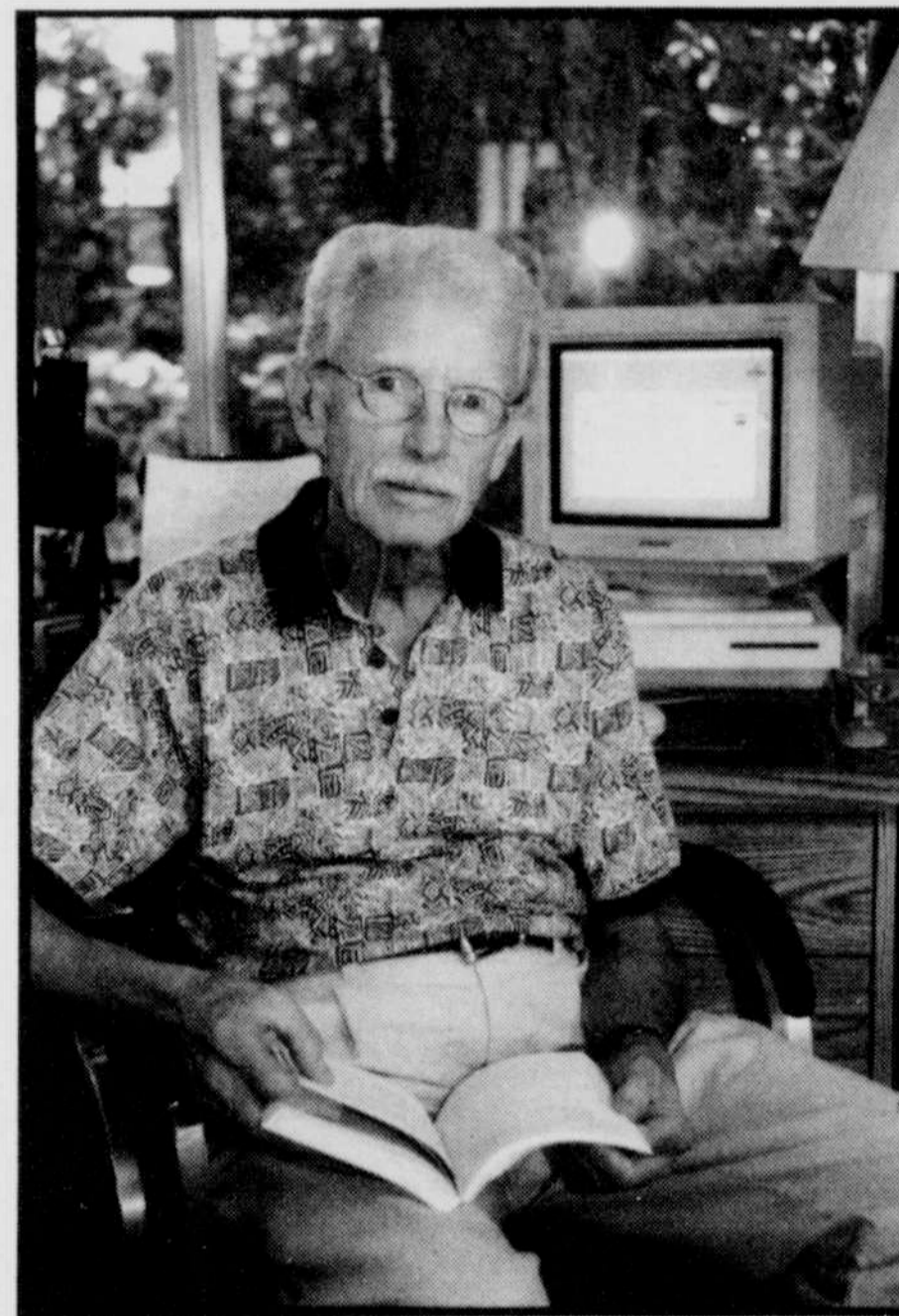
who hails from Los Angeles.

According to Atwood, Deaf GLOW sprung from its parent organization, the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, which is a nationwide group serving the deaf sexual minorities community.

At a RAD convention in Florida nine years ago, delegates and officers decided to divide the country into two regions and thus began Deaf GLOW. NWRAD, founded in 1981, is one of many Deaf GLOW chapters.

Atwood cites the assistance of the Seattle-based Pride Foundation, AIDS Project of the Deaf, and Gay City Health Project for making the event a success. The next Deaf GLOW conference is slated for 1998 in Denver.

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Hank Stack

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

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ries of important topics like gay rights, sexuality, health care and education, they were able to strengthen their commitment to each other as a community and to see what direction they wanted to take in the future," she says.

The gathering featured keynote speakers Rob Roth, the executive director of the Community Service Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and Christine Buchholz, a specialist in the HIV/AIDS field.

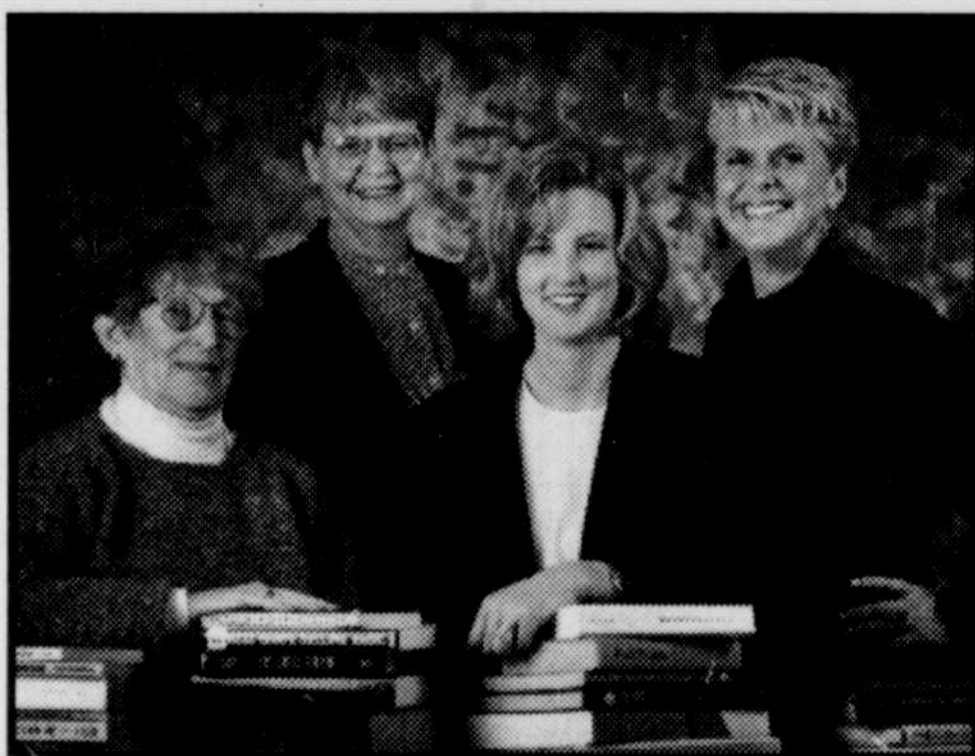
cultures."

We asked Stack to highlight some of the major differences between the respective communities.

First, he says, the vast majority of deaf people choose other deaf people for partners and spouses, while the reverse is true of the deaf/gay subculture.

"Growing up deaf, you learn to be open and share details about your private life with other

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