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since 1983

PUBLISHER AND EDITOR

Renée LaChance

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER

Teri Ventura

COPY EDITOR

Kelly M. Bryan

REPORTERS

Inga Sorensen

Bob Roehr

Rex Wockner

CALENDAR EDITOR

Kristine Chatwood

PHOTOGRAPHER

Linda Kliever

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Meg Grace

ADVERTISING REPS

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Marty Davis

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E. Ann Hinds

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Rupert Kinnard

FORMATTER

Christopher Cuttone

TYPESETTER

Christopher Cuttone

DISTRIBUTION

Kathy Bethel

Rachel Ebor

Darla Meyer-Sims

Donald Rogers

Megan Weber

CONTRIBUTORS

Bonnie Ruth Beebe

Kristine Chatwood

Cathay Che

Richard Shumate

Daniel Vaillancourt

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Ad policy. No sexually exploitative advertising will be accepted. Compensation for errors in, or cancellation of, advertising will be made with credit toward future advertising.

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steppin' out



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

The Lesbian Community Project's 11th annual softball competition, *Tournament of Choice*, held Aug. 3-4, had winners in four divisions. "Northend Madness" from Olympia, Wash., took the Blue Division; "Jo Mama's Girls" from Seattle took the Green Division; "Thirteen Nice Girls" from Olympia won the Red Division; and the "Just Out-Circle Healthcare Adjusters" from Portland took the Purple Division. "The Furies" are shown here playing for second place in the Red Division. Terry Gruvelle of Portland's "CHAOS" won the Barbara Martin Sports Award.

guest editorial

The politics of outing

We as a country are obsessed with the either/or, the starkness of a dichotomy that admits no gray continuum between polarities

by Bob Roehr

The current flurry of "outing" activities raises anew that perennial question of who is gay and who is not. Is it biology? Is it acts? Is it a social construct? Is it the opinion of others? Or is it self-identity and affirmation?

U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.) was recently pressed out of the closet, and now Republican vice presidential nominee Jack Kemp is being reported in mainstream and gay media as "rumored" to be gay.

Adolph Hitler believed that having a Jewish maternal grandmother made a person Jewish, even if he or she never practiced that faith. It was enough to get a person sent to the gas chamber.

A single assertion of same-sex activity can erase decades of marriage and the presence of children—which logically would suggest, at most, the label of bisexual. We as a country are obsessed with the either/or, the starkness of a dichotomy that admits no gray continuum between polarities.

The recent spate of outing of members of Congress asserts a number of things. First that the person has committed homosexual acts, second that he or she is a member of the gay community, and third that he or she must therefore adhere to a specific dogma on particular legislation.

I may be titillated by accusations of acts, but that is grist for entertainment, not public policy. Nor is it identity. And acts certainly are not the definition of community. That is a lie of small-minded opponents who slander our community in an attempt to reduce it to nothing more than acts—and then outlaw those acts. Community is based upon free association, not the labeling of another.

The third leap is the longest: that all members of the gay community must categorically believe certain things. In this

case, they must oppose the Defense of Marriage Act regardless of other views or perceived obligations. To do anything less is deemed hypocritical and worthy of the sanction of outing.

That belies one of the most prevalent mantras of the gay and lesbian community, our claim of diversity. It also ignores the debatable question of whether elected officials represent and vote their consciences or their constituencies.

It seems ironic, but perhaps the Pentagon got it right with "don't ask, don't tell" when it said that people who utter the words "I am gay" are gay, and all others are subject to some element of suspicion. Under the policy people can go to gay clubs, march in gay parades, even engage in homosexual sex and still not be gay.

But people who say "I am gay" are held to be so, even if they are virgins bereft of a single homosexual act. Perhaps that is the right standard to hold. Perhaps what matters most is how people think of themselves.

I hold no desire to publicly expose elected officials who are carnal homosexuals but who run from the community. What I dearly do want is more openly gay public officials, ones who acknowledge the community, draw strength from it and give back to it. Such relationships do not grow out of abuse and disrespect, they are built over time, through positive effort.

Gay is a word of pride, not of shame. It can be claimed and proclaimed but not imposed. To force the label upon another is to besmirch the word and its namer; it says little about the one to whom it is attached.

Bob Roehr is a freelance journalist based in Washington, D.C. He contributes to many lesbian and gay newsmagazines including Just Out.

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