

national news

Press in the flesh

NLGJA convention draws more than 500 gay and lesbian journalists to Miami; Linda Ellerbee declared an honorary lesbian and Gresham paper lauded

by Richard Shumate

Today, Anita Bryant is but an unemployed lounge singer in the Midwest, and the NLGJA convention is here in Miami.

Nearly 20 years after Bryant made Miami the ugly flash point in the battle for gay rights, the 1996 convention of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association kicked off here Sept. 5 with that retort by convention chairman Jeffrey Newman. The three-day event drew more than 500 journalists, including contingents from Canada, England and Germany.

NLGJA also honored news organizations for excellence in coverage of gay and lesbian issues, and Oregon's own *Gresham Outlook* was cited for a feature on the 37-year relationship between two gay men.

Speaking to the assembled journalists, NLGJA president Roy Aarons said that "NLGJA has never been stronger and positioned as well as we are at this point."

In just its sixth year of existence, NLGJA has more than 900 members in the United States, and—at a meeting in Miami—its board formally approved an affiliation agreement with NLGJA/Canada, bringing the total North American membership to nearly 1,200. Gay journalists representing fledgling organizations in England and Germany also came to Miami as observers.

This year, NLGJA also hired its first full-time executive director, Mike Frederickson, and moved its headquarters from California to Washington, D.C.

The big-name draw at this convention was television journalist and producer Linda Ellerbee, who was declared an "honorary lesbian" for the event. Ellerbee talked about her own iconoclastic life in a business awash in conformity, saying, "[I]f you believe you are right, do it your own way."

Speaking about the fight for gay equality, Ellerbee says her years observing both the Afri-

can American civil rights movement and the feminist movement have convinced her that change in this country only occurs as the result of pressure.

"You are right to keep the pressure on the people in power," she said.

Also addressing the convention was Ray Suarez, host of the popular *Talk of the Nation* program on National Public Radio, which has been lauded for its coverage of gay and lesbian issues. Suarez says he continues to be surprised at how, when talking about gay issues, "otherwise clear-headed people become capable of saying the wildest things."

National Public Radio has long been the target of conservative critics, who accuse it of politically liberal bias and made an unsuccessful attempt to delete its funding in 1995. However,

Suarez said he does not believe that the pressure on NPR from the right has caused it to back away from covering gay and lesbian issues.

"Life has changed surprisingly little inside the walls since the days when we were fighting for our lives," he said.

At the two previous NLGJA conventions, the Clinton administration sent

high-profile representatives to speak—former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders and presidential adviser George Stephanopoulos. This year, despite the fact that the president himself was in Florida during the convention, the administration did not send a senior official to address the convention, though openly gay Clinton advisor Bob Hattoy was on hand. The Dole campaign also declined an invitation to participate.

During the convention, the NLGJA also presented awards for distinguished coverage of gay and lesbian issues, and the two top honors went to the TV program *In the Life*, for a report on two gay male lovers persecuted in Romania, and to nationally syndicated columnist Deb Price, who

broke the story on Bob Dole's waffling over whether to accept a contribution from a gay Republican group.

The *Gresham Outlook* was also cited for "No Less a Family," Sharon Nesbit's feature on Jack Abele and Warren James. The couple lived together in Gresham for more than 37 years until Abele's death in 1995 at age 85. Nesbit chronicled their life story and James' mourning process after his partner's death, which included completing

growers, marked the beginning of the anti-gay push by the religious right as we know it today.

Among the panelists was Ruth Shack, the former Dade County commissioner who sponsored the amendment and pushed it through the commission, only to see it overturned in a referendum. At the time, her husband was Anita Bryant's agent. Ironically, Shack attributed much of the blame for the debacle to some leaders in the gay community who, she says, insisted on making



The *Gresham Outlook* was honored for an article about Warren James (left) and Jack Abele the coming out process.

The event also featured a panel discussion entitled, "What the Orange Juice Lady Did," where panelists recalled and analyzed the brutal campaign in 1977 to overturn an amendment to a human rights ordinance in Dade County, where Miami is located, that would have extended protection against discrimination to gay men and lesbians. That backlash, led by Anita Bryant, who was then a spokeswoman for Florida's orange

graphic statements about sex that turned off voters who might otherwise have been sympathetic.

The NLGJA board, meeting during the Miami convention, voted to hold its 1997 gathering in Chicago. The group also agreed to participate in a study at San Francisco State University that will evaluate the quality of the media's coverage of minority groups, including gay men and lesbians. The study is being funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

NEW STUDIES LINK HOMOPHOBIA TO BAD HEALTH

Life deep in the closet can be detrimental to more than just the spirit and the psyche—it may also contribute to more frequent illnesses.

At a panel at the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association convention on Sept. 6, Dr. Gregory Herek, a research psychologist at the University of California-Davis, discussed the results of two recent studies that looked at possible links between the health of gay men and lesbians and the effects of homophobia. One of those studies, by researchers at UCLA, showed a direct correlation between the closet and the level of non-HIV-related illness.

The researchers looked at a group of 220 HIV-negative men. They were queried to determine how they rated on a scale of "closetedness," from completely out to completely closeted. Then their medical histories were scrutinized to look at the number of times they had suffered from an upper respiratory illnesses in the last five years.

"People who are mostly or completely in

the closet were showing a much higher incidence of illness," said Herek. He said a similar study now under way looking at the link between the closet and skin cancer is showing similar results.

Herek has also been conducting a study involving 2,300 lesbians and gay men in the Sacramento, Calif., area, looking at the effects of hate crimes motivated by anti-gay bias on depression.

The people in this study were asked about whether they had been a victim of a hate crime, a violent crime not related to their sexual identity or both types of attack, as well as how long ago those crimes occurred. A general and expected pattern emerged: People tend to suffer from depression after they have been the victim of a crime, regardless of whether it was motivated by anti-gay bias, and their depression lessens over time.

However, Herek says that those who were victims of bias-related crimes tended to have more severe depressions than those who were victims of a nonbias crime, and the study also showed that hate crime victims take longer to recover. People who had been the victim of both

a hate crime and a violent crime not related to anti-gay bias suffered from the most depression and took the longest to recover.

"All crimes have a psychological event on the victim, but it looks like hate crimes have more of an impact, psychologically," Herek said.

Based on his research, he theorizes that the difference lies in the belief of victims that "the world is out to get them because of their sexual orientation," which is a factor they can neither control nor change.

As for the effect of homophobia on the fight against AIDS, Herek discussed another set of public opinion surveys showing that most of the stigma generated among the public toward people with AIDS stems not from fear of catching the HIV virus but from cultural and religious disapproval of homosexuality.

In one revealing study cited by Herek, people were asked about the likelihood that people could contract HIV under certain scenarios. Almost 10 percent said they believed two HIV-negative men having sex together while using a condom were at risk for infection, which is theoretically impossible, and 12 percent said

they thought two women having sex with each other were likely to get HIV, which is considered highly unlikely.

"AIDS provides a proxy for many of these people to express anti-gay prejudice," says Herek.

Also discussed during the NLGJA panel was a report by the Public Media Center in San Francisco, which has been studying the effects of AIDS stigma on the United States' ability to cope with the HIV pandemic.

AIDS activist Timothy Sweeney, a consultant to the center on the issues surrounding AIDS stigma, said the center is pushing a multi-pronged campaign to "deconstruct" the links between homophobia and attitudes about AIDS. According to Sweeney, strategies in that campaign will include enlisting family members of those who have died of AIDS to speak out about the sexual identities of their loved ones, as well as trying to bring sympathetic segments of the religious community into the debate, especially those institutions that already sponsor AIDS care services.

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