

**L**ove may know no borders but governments surely do, and judging by the current round of political rhetoric, keeping a tight reign on who comes to the United States—and who ultimately gets to stay—is a priority of more than a few policymakers.

Not surprisingly, that reality is frustrating for many gay men and lesbians involved in international relationships. But frustration seems par for the course when it comes to lesbian and gay families and immigration. That's because while the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service permits the immigration of a foreign spouse—recognizing the basic right of Americans to live with their loved ones in this country—gay or lesbian citizens trying to permanently unite in this country with their international partners are denied that same opportunity because federal law does not recognize them as family.

The Rev. Jeanne G. Knepper, co-founder and director of Shalom Ministries, a Portland-based outreach of the Metropolitan District of the Oregon/Idaho Conference of the United Methodist Church, is among those attempting to address and hopefully alleviate some of the pain and discontent experienced by many gay men and lesbians in international relationships.

Shalom Ministries, founded in 1993 by Knepper and her then-longtime partner, is geared toward gay men and lesbians, those on the economic fringe, and others who may feel alienated by religion.

Knepper recently helped establish a new immigration support and resource-sharing group for gay men and lesbians. Knepper says she had not previously thought much about the problems facing these couples, but was approached by "someone who is not an American citizen, but is involved with an American citizen."

"It really opened my eyes to the tremendous problems [same-sex, mixed-country couples] face," says Knepper, adding the new support group met for the first time in July.

She says the gathering attracted a handful of gay and lesbian couples, individuals whose partners are currently living in their native countries, and those concerned with social justice.

"The most pressing issue facing people was that they were coming up on immigration deadlines and were concerned about having to leave the country and leave their partners behind," explains Knepper.

"Heterosexuals can get married, which takes care of that problem, but gays and lesbians can't. So we wound up talking about the need to secure the right to marry," she says.

Brad Maier, immigration counselor and coordinator of Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees, a program of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, estimates 800,000 people immigrate to the United States each year and take up permanent residence here.

## Love fenced out

*Two groups seek to address the difficulties of same-sex relationships hindered by borders*

by Inga Sorensen

He says about 75 percent of those cases involve family reunification, i.e., someone from another country comes to the United States to reunite with a spouse, children, parents or siblings who are currently permanent residents or U.S. citizens. The remaining 25 percent of cases involve people who immigrate here for employment purposes.

Maier says gay men and lesbians who want their international partners to join them as permanent residents are facing an uphill battle, particularly if those partners have no "immediate family

status here, be deported, and face a fine," he says. "The penalties are stiff."

A 25-year-old Portland woman, who asked not be identified, says she never yearned to be legally married. However, the woman is involved in a four-year relationship with another woman, a British citizen.

"I miss her so much. I want her to be able to come here and stay," she tells *Just Out*. "I went to Pride this year and it was very painful to see everyone with their partners. It made me sad that I couldn't be with my partner."



Rev. Jeanne G. Knepper

members" here or do not work in a specialized field.

"The bottom line is that until the INS and federal government recognize same-sex marriages, same-sex couples don't have the important option that heterosexuals do, which is marrying a U.S. citizen."

Gay men and lesbians could marry members of the opposite sex who are U.S. citizens, but doing so, says Maier, is illegal if the marriage is not deemed bona fide.

"Defrauding the INS is a felony. If someone is caught, they could permanently lose any legal

status here, be deported, and face a fine," he says. "The penalties are stiff."

"She's a musician and an artist, which means she likely couldn't come here because of her employment."

The woman says she and her partner held their own wedding ceremony last Valentine's Day, but until government officially sanctions such unions, the two will likely remain separated.

"If we were straight, we could simply get married. That would essentially be the end of it," she says. "I never thought I wanted to get married,

but given this situation I understand the vital need for the right to do so."

"It's a tough situation," says Maier, adding that the INS has at least begun recognizing gay men and lesbians as "a social group" that may experience persecution due to their sexual orientation.

The INS officially recognized that gay men and lesbians may be eligible for asylum as persecuted members of a social group in 1994.

It was only four years earlier that Congress dropped a "sexual deviation" clause from immigration regulations which stated gay men and lesbians could be barred from entering the country.

The INS for the first time granted asylum in a case involving sexual orientation in March 1994, when a Mexican gay man won his bid to stay in the United States after telling immigration authorities he had been harassed, beaten and raped by Mexican police because he was gay.

Several months later, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno issued a directive acknowledging that lesbians and gay men persecuted abroad could qualify for asylum.

A handful of other countries, including Canada, Germany and Finland, have taken the same step since 1988.

Typically, those applying for asylum have to prove that they as individuals have well-grounded fear of persecution—either sponsored or condoned by government—because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinions or membership in a social group.

Meeting those criteria may be difficult for lesbians and gay men because there is less official documentation in various countries of the conditions under which they live.

"It may be worth exploring though," says Maier. "I'd certainly be willing to talk with people or refer them to appropriate sources."

Though the participants are confronted with many obstacles, Knepper says she hopes the new group will at least partially meet their needs.

"I think this is an issue that has been somewhat overlooked by the gay and lesbian community. While there certainly has been a strong and honest effort by some to be interconnected with other groups and issues, there is a counter dynamic that says we shouldn't 'water down' gay rights with 'other' issues, like immigration."

Knepper says the quandary faced by gay men and lesbians involved with international partners highlights the oft-mentioned adage that "we are everywhere" and are not limited to one issue—or encircled by one border.

*The gay and lesbian immigration support and resource-sharing group will meet the first Saturday of each month beginning in October.*

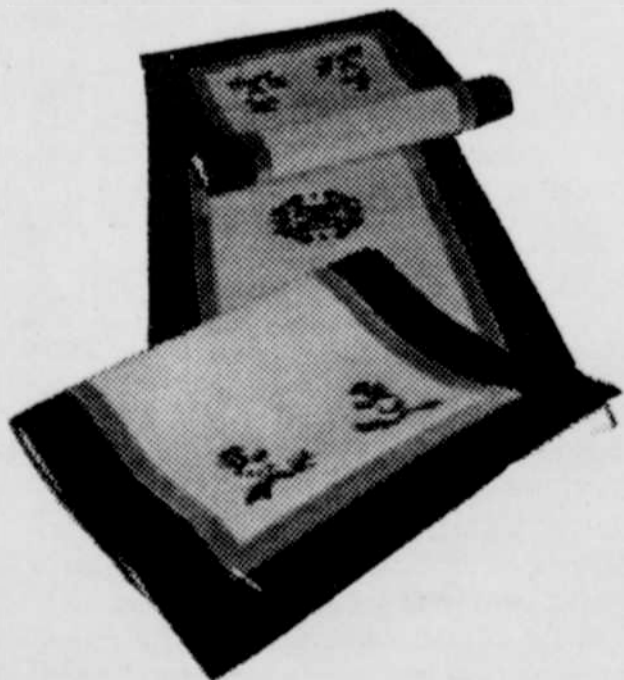
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*Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's SOAR program can be reached by calling 284-3002.*

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