

national news

After the storm

In the wake of the Cunanan case, communities nationwide examine crisis protocols—or lack thereof

by Inga Sorensen

There's a spree killer on the loose who may be inclined to harm gay men. Ho hum.

So seemed the general attitude among Portland's gay and lesbian community in the days prior to the death of Andrew Phillip Cunanan, who as you likely know, was a prime suspect in the murders of five people, including three gay men.

"I can't say I'm really worked up about this," admits Suzanne Pharr, executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project, which runs the Anti-Violence Line, a hot line designed in part to "help compile statistics on hate crimes and give victims a chance to talk with someone sympathetic."

"Serial killers don't really catch my imagination.... I'd rather focus on the everyday violence and harassment aimed at the queer community," says Pharr.

Cunanan, 27, was one of the FBI's most wanted fugitives, suspected in the July 15 assassination-style shooting death of fashion designer Gianni Versace in Miami Beach, as well as the murders of four other men in Minneapolis, Chicago and New Jersey. The killings began in April.

Cunanan was found dead July 23 on a Miami houseboat in an apparent suicide.

Between the time of Versace's murder and the discovery of Cunanan's body, a worldwide media frenzy and manhunt were underway.

On July 16, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects, a coalition of programs that document and advocate for victims of anti-queer violence/harassment, called upon the FBI and local law enforcement agencies to work cooperatively with members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities to apprehend Cunanan.

NCAVP also announced it would assist the FBI and local law enforcement agencies by distributing fliers warning about Cunanan in sexual minority communities across the country.

Two days before Cunanan was found dead, *Just Out* conducted an informal telephone survey of several Portland bars that serve a gay clientele.

Though Cunanan, who was gay and known to frequent queer clubs, was the suspect in murders around the country, no establishment we contacted had posted a shot of Cunanan on its premises.

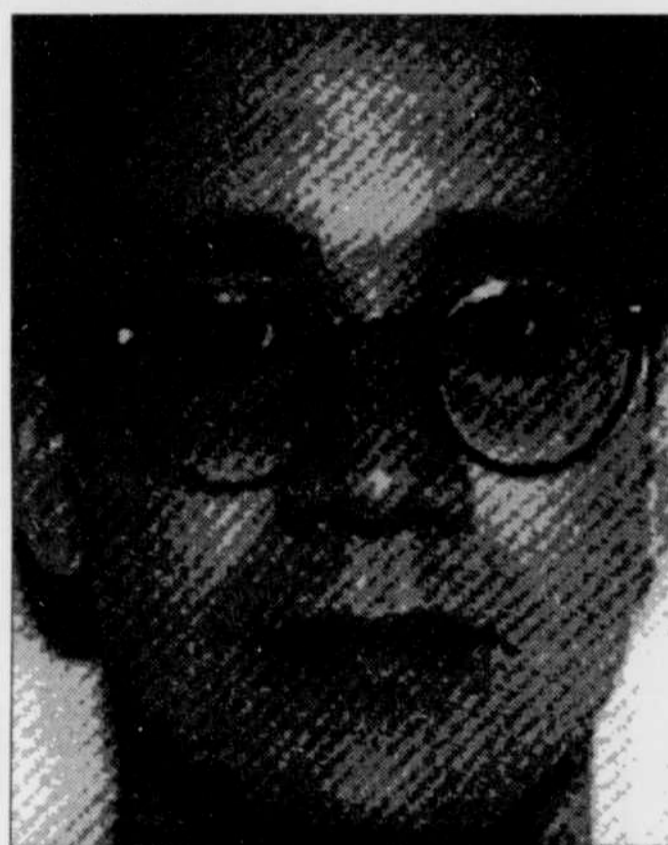
"People are sick of hearing about it," said one worker at the Embers Avenue, located at 110 NW Broadway.

A bartender at Eagle PDX, 1300 W Burnside

St., meanwhile, told us he didn't believe it was a far-fetched notion that Cunanan could wind up in Portland. "He could be anywhere.... This city is full of people who come from someplace else," he said.

A C.C. Slaughter's (1410 SW Stark St.) bartender agreed, adding that it would have been a good idea to at least put up posters.

"This has been a topic of conversation here. There seemed to be a lot of sadness for the Versace family and the fashion industry," said a bartender at Scandals Tavern (1038 SW Stark St.). "People also talked about how it was a shame



Andrew Cunanan

that this could be used against the gay community by conservatives."

He added, "I don't think anyone is concerned about him showing up here, though I personally think it could happen."

William Warren, himself the survivor of a brutal gay-bashing several years ago on the East Coast, thinks it could happen, too.

Warren is involved with the Portland Police Bureau's Sexual Minority Roundtable, an ongoing gathering of police and members of the sexual minority community. Warren also works with the bureau's Crisis Response Team, which assists sexual minority victims and/or their families during the immediate aftermath of a crisis.

Warren says he alerted Portland police to the Cunanan case several weeks ago via an *Advocate*

article which focused on the possibility that Cunanan was a serial killer targeting gay men.

"I suggested the bureau and FBI should at least send out the information in a Roundtable flier and let the CRT know in case anyone called," says Warren.

(Sgt. Annette Kemp of the Portland Police Bureau says information about Cunanan was included in a notice about an upcoming Roundtable meeting.)

NCAVP members, meanwhile, say FBI interaction with individual member agencies about Cunanan has been varied.

"Even as this horrific episode of violence that touched the gay community is apparently over, we must remember the problem of violence in America does not end with the suicide of Andrew Cunanan," says Elizabeth Birch. "Let us not forget that while overall violent crime is on the decline in our country...reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation continue to be on the rise."

For example, gay activists report excellent communication with FBI officials in Minneapolis, but Christine Quinn, executive director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, says FBI agents took 45 minutes to respond to a report that a man fitting Cunanan's description was in a Big Apple gay bar; by the time agents arrived, the man had left.

According to FBI spokesman Pat Geonetta, the Portland FBI office did contact the Gay Resource Connection, a statewide hot line offering information and referrals relevant to the queer community, about Cunanan.

Tom Richardson, who oversees the hot line, confirms that a local FBI representative called the line on July 21. According to the log, the agent left a contact number where he could be reached if

any hot-line callers had information related to Cunanan.

According to Warren, however, there seems to be no established protocol for how the community should respond to this kind of scenario in the future.

Who calls whom? Where does one get posters and other materials? Should there be an organized system? If so, what should it look like?

For his part, Richardson says there's probably not much one can do. "I don't think the community will pay any attention," he says candidly. "Some activists will, but as for the rest of the community, that's a different story."

The FBI's Geonetta says the key is cooperation and communication.

He tells *Just Out* that law enforcement and the affected community need to "keep the lines of communication open," e.g., if people in the queer community learn of something, they should pick up the phone and call law enforcement, or if law enforcement has important information, it should contact members of the gay and lesbian community.

Sound advice, given the prevalence of anti-queer violence.

"Even as this horrific episode of violence that touched the gay community is apparently over, we must remember the problem of violence in America does not end with the suicide of Andrew Cunanan," says Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Campaign. "Let us not forget that while overall violent crime is on the decline in our country, the FBI and gay anti-violence groups around the nation have documented that reported hate crimes based on sexual orientation continue to be on the rise."

Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, adds: "For us, Andrew Cunanan's death does not change our day-to-day reality. Just being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is all too often reason enough for someone to assault, stab, maim or kill a member of our community. Since April, how many hate crimes against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people have been committed where there was no major press coverage?"

NCAVP member agencies, meanwhile, have been tracking serial killers in the sexual minority community. In 1994 an NCAVP report identified eight such serial killers across the country. According to the coalition, five of these killers remain at large and are collectively responsible for at least 35 murders.

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