

# local news

**H**owie Baggadonutz was adamant about getting his message out when he took to the stage during the Portland queer Pride rally in June.

"What Coors does is insidious. They throw a little money our way and we're so hungry and desperate we take it, no matter what the cost," says Baggadonutz, 39, a colorful figure in the Rose City's lesbian and gay community, who during the post-parade rally publicly trashed Coors' corporate sponsorship of Pride.

In doing so, Baggadonutz, who was a slated emcee though not an official representative of Pride Northwest Inc., the festival's organizer, also raised the question of why Pride Northwest selected Coors Brewing Co. as a major sponsor in the first place.

The controversy surrounding Coors and queers has bubbled up throughout the country for many years, and continues to do so.

For two decades the company has been the focus of a boycott stemming in large part from some Coors family members' links to ultraconservative organizations.

Members of the Coors clan hold positions with the Adolph Coors Family Trust, Coors Brewing Co., Adolph Coors Co., the Adolph Coors Foundation and the Castle Rock Foundation, which was created in 1993 with an endowment from the Adolph Coors Foundation.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based People for the American Way, Castle Rock Foundation has helped fund conservative organizations, including the Heritage Foundation, which supports an outright ban on gay men and lesbians in the military, and the Free Congress Foundation, which recently filed an amicus brief against same-gender marriage. The brief refers to homosexuality as "repugnant" and "a violation of the laws of God and nature."

William Coors is chairman of Coors Brewing Co. and Adolph Coors Co., and is president of the Castle Rock Foundation; Joseph Coors, former CEO of Adolph Coors Co., is a Heritage Foundation honorary trustee; Grover Coors sits on the Heritage Foundation's board of trustees; Peter Coors is vice president of the Castle Rock Foundation; and Jeffrey Coors is Castle Rock's treasurer.

Pride Northwest, as well as gay and lesbian groups nationwide who have accepted Coors Brewing Co. money, are quick to point out that Coors Brewing is a publicly traded company. However, current documents from the Securities and Exchange Commission show that the Adolph Coors Family Trust owns 100 percent of the company's voting stock.

Coors backers counter criticisms by saying the company—including Coors family board members—voted in May 1995 to extend full domestic-partnership benefits to same-sex couples.

Additionally, Earl Nissen, a company corporate relations manager, says Coors Brewing has had a nondiscrimination employment policy inclusive of gay men and lesbians since the 1970s, and has an 11-year-old friendly employment policy toward those living with HIV/AIDS.

Four years ago the company recognized a gay and lesbian employees' group, and Nissen says over the past decade Coors Brewing has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars bolstering the gay and lesbian community via funding for athletic leagues and Pride events, as well as providing support for HIV/AIDS issues.

Nissen also notes that Coors Brewing has been targeted for protest by anti-gay activist the Rev. Fred Phelps, known for his vitriolic pickets heralding the advent of AIDS because the disease "kills fags."

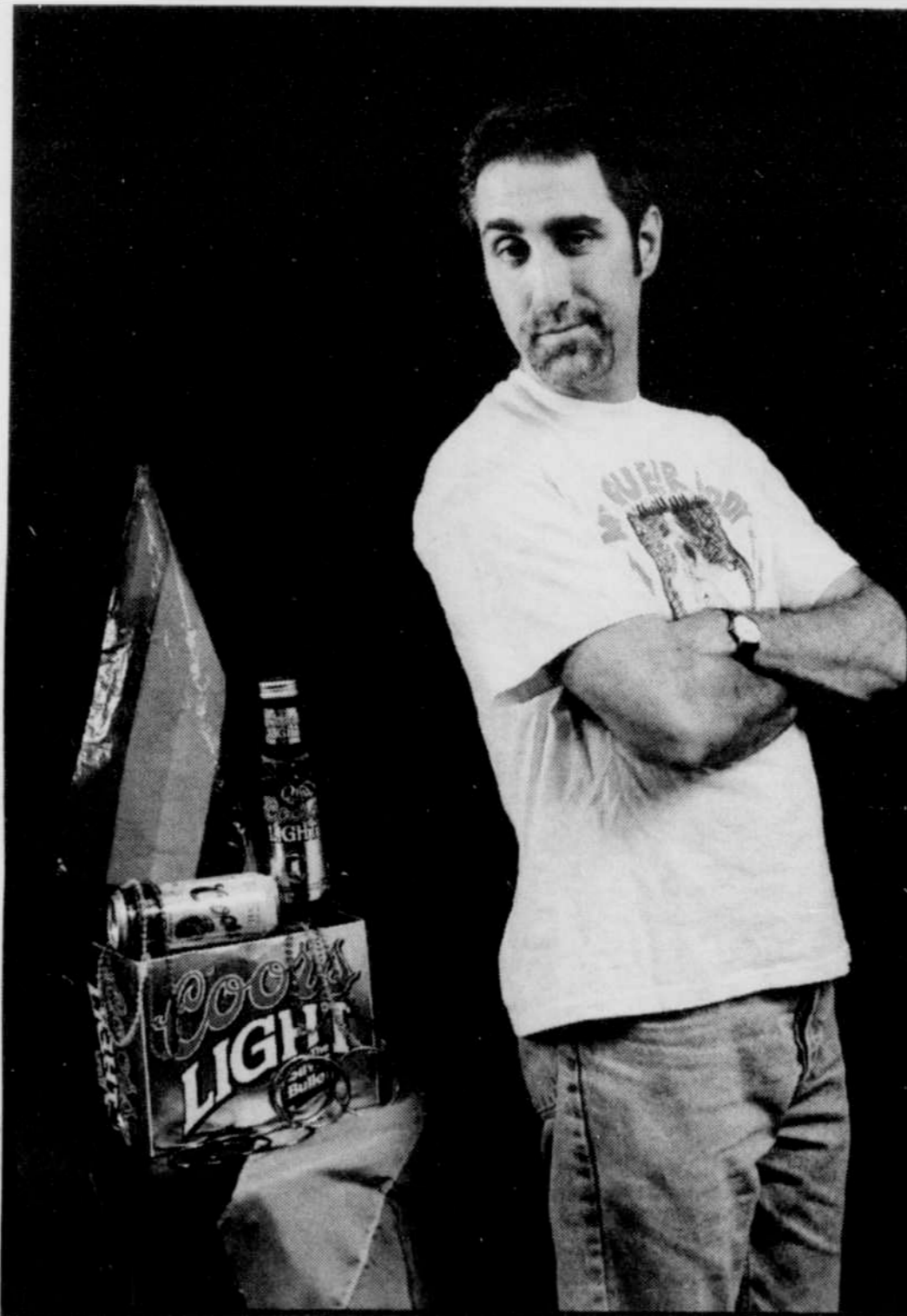
"We get attacked by gay activists and anti-gay activists," Nissen says.

**W**hen asked whether the company, which is headquartered in Colorado, contributed money to either the pro- or anti-

## Coors brewhaha

*The beer company's Pride sponsorship drew some protest—but has a long-held grudge gone flat?*

by Inga Sorensen



Howie Baggadonutz

Amendment 2 campaigns, Nissen tells *Just Out*, "No.... We don't support legislation on issues not directly related to our business—issues dealing with beer."

As for the persistent criticisms of Coors, Nissen, 38, who is openly gay, says no brewing company today matches Coors when it comes to gay-friendly policies.

He also says the boycott was initially spawned by derogatory remarks made by, among others, slain San Francisco politico Harvey Milk, to garner union support.

According to Nissen, those comments revolved around Coors' policy 20 years ago of polygraph testing. Gay activists during that period reportedly said the tests included questions about sexual orientation—a claim Nissen says was untrue but was nonetheless circulated in the gay and lesbian community.

He further says opponents of Coors these days are generally "community elders whose mindsets are stuck back in the 1970s."

Elders like Dr. Donald Kilhefner of West Hollywood, who led a protest at the July 11 gala opening of Outfest, the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

He and other activists were outraged that Outfest accepted an estimated \$20,000 in sponsorship money from Coors Brewing Co.

"Gays and lesbians must not be seduced into financing their own oppression," says Kilhefner. "Coors has mounted a slick public relations campaign to break the boycott and regain the gay

market. They are using tactics of deceit to confuse the gay public. They offer chump change to a few gay organizations but pour millions and millions of dollars into the politics of hate and homophobia."

"The Coors boycott is alive and well," adds Morris Kight, a member of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission who initiated gay participation in the boycott 20 years ago. "No single organization can break the boycott because Coors marketers bribe them to do so. Only the gay and lesbian public can decide whether to contribute to their sworn enemies. I know they are wise enough not to do that."

Despite the protest, hundreds of gay men and lesbians were observed drinking Coors beer during Outfest.

**S**uch was the case in Portland several weeks back, as gay men and lesbians jammed into the Portland Pride festival beer garden, which featured none other than Coors brewery products.

According to Christopher Webster, treasurer and board member for Pride Northwest Inc., Coors Brewing Co. paid \$5,000 to be Pride's corporate beer sponsor.

He says Pride Northwest approached several breweries—including Miller, Budweiser, Coors and Henry Weinhard—about potential sponsorship.

Webster says only two—Miller and Coors—responded affirmatively, with Coors offering a

*Baggadonutz asks of Pride Northwest board members: "[Do] they understand and care about the issues surrounding Coors? Do they think Coors is basically OK to have as a sponsor?... I'm even going so far as to request that [the] board vote on the following issue: 'Is Pride '98 willing to take corporate funds from Coors Brewing Company?'"*

one-time festival package and Miller a three-time commitment.

"We looked at the offers, and given Coors' gay-friendly policies and the fact that we didn't want to lock future boards into anything, we decided to go with Coors," he says, adding that Miller Brewing Co. is a subsidiary of tobacco giant Philip Morris.

"So do we choose a company with a good policy for gays and some muddied ties to right-wing organizations, or a company that makes a product that kills thousands of people each year?" he questions.

(On a related note, *Just Out* has accepted Coors advertising dollars. Publisher Renée LaChance says once she made it clear that doing so would in no way influence any editorial copy, she was, at least professionally, comfortable with the decision. Incidentally, *Just Out* did not receive any letters or phone calls of protest.)

According to Webster, the Pride Northwest board embarked on some spirited discussion over its consideration of Coors sponsorship, ultimately voting—though not unanimously—to accept Coors' offer.

He also says the board attempted to raise the estimated \$36,000 necessary to launch Pride via numerous channels including non-beer sponsors, merchandise sales, food sales, vendor space and tent rental fees, and donations.

Admission to the festival is free.

"And we would like to keep it that way," says Webster. "Maybe 90 percent of our participants can pay an admission fee, but what about the other 10 percent? What about the street kids? We are beholden to that 10 percent, too. If we have to accept sponsorship from Coors in order to keep this event free, well, I think that's an OK trade-off."

Webster also says he understands critics' concerns, although he admits he didn't appreciate Baggadonutz's use of "guerrilla tactics," i.e., going up on stage and blasting a major Pride sponsor.

"I thought Howie was going to say something like, 'If everyone in the crowd would donate a little, we wouldn't need to accept sponsorship from Coors.' That's not what he did. He just railed on them," he says.

Baggadonutz admits he may have ambushed Pride Northwest, but adds he's more concerned with the message behind the dramatic display.

And he says he's willing to walk his talk.

In a July 3 letter to Pride Northwest, Baggadonutz vows to "work in conjunction" with board members to help secure sponsorship for Pride '98. But he wants some assurances, too.

Baggadonutz asks of board members: "[Do] they understand and care about the issues surrounding Coors? Do they think Coors is basically OK to have as a sponsor? These questions need to be answered before I even start to work with Pride Northwest on sponsorship. I'm even going so far as to request that Pride Northwest's board vote on the following issue: 'Is Pride '98 willing to take corporate funds from Coors Brewing Company?'"

He adds, "I understand it might be tough to find another \$5,000 sponsor like Coors, and we may only raise \$2,500—that is the risk Pride Northwest has to take. However, Pride has lived without Coors money in the past, and I'm sure with careful financial planning, and some revenue enhancement, Pride can easily live without Coors in the future."

By the way, Webster tells *Just Out* though Pride Northwest estimated it would cost \$36,000 for Pride, the event ultimately cost about \$30,000.

Webster says the board hasn't had a chance to ponder Baggadonutz's proposal, but will likely address it during a late-summer retreat.

"This was the right decision for us this year," Webster says. "I can't say about next time. What I do know is that we want to do the right thing for the community."