

local news

Burgeoning bisexuality

With their inclusion this year in the official title of queer pride, a new Bi Day event and a growing cluster of social and political affinity groups, Portland bis are riding high

by Inga Sorensen

Five years can feel like a lifetime in queer culture.

Just ask Jeannie LaFrance, a bisexual woman who helped establish the Bradley-Angle House Bisexual Women's Caucus in 1992.

LaFrance, who was then the only out bi-identified woman on staff, did so after approaching the anti-domestic violence organization's lesbian caucus, only to be informed it was a dyke-exclusive entity.

"Lesbians wanted space for lesbians," she says, matter-of-factly.

Rather than lament that reality, LaFrance, now 31, and a bisexual woman who was volunteering at Bradley-Angle House, simply started their own caucus, which five years later is a vibrant gathering open to bi women working not only within Bradley-Angle House, but other anti-domestic violence groups throughout the metropolitan area as well.

"Sometimes we sit around someone's house for five hours eating pizza and talking, and sometimes we do more formal things like a workshop," says LaFrance. "This caucus has been a wonderful way to educate people and establish a connection with others who have similar goals and experiences."

Though much work clearly remains to be done, bi invisibility and exclusion—par for the course it seems just a few years ago—appears to be on the wane, at least in the Portland area.

That may have to do with the insistence by out bisexuals such as LaFrance, not to mention the existence of several local bi-oriented groups, which offer bisexuals a place to meet socially, as well as to organize politically.

Those groups include the Bisexual Community Forum, BiNet Oregon, Bradley-Angle House Bisexual Women's Caucus, Portland Bisexual Women, Portland Bisexual Alliance and the latest addition, BiNet Portland.

Gone are the days (as of 1997) when Portland queer pride excluded bisexuals in its title, or when queer groups failed to mention bisexuals as part of their constituencies. Gone are the days when *Willamette Week* clumped bisexuals' personals in its "Other" category, which also includes people seeking extramarital affairs and sexual threesomes.

Those days are past due in large part to the bisexual women and men who are stepping forward to educate and lobby for their concerns.

"It's very healthy to have lots of groups," says Sven Bonnichsen, president and political director of the Portland Bisexual Alliance.

Established two years ago, PBA is a nonprofit organization that, according to its mission statement, "advocates for the interests of the bi community... by initiating community-building events, political work for the rights and protection of bisexuals, and public education on bisexual issues."

Bonnichsen says PBA's bent is more political than other groups, and since its founding it has organized public demonstrations against *Willamette Week* in protest of the paper's handling of bisexual personals.

(*Willamette Week* will not place bi-identified ads in its "Women Seeking Women" or "Men Seeking Men" sections. Until recently, bi ads were plopped into the "Other" category because there was no personals section for bisexuals. The paper shifted its policy in April, and created an "Either/Or" category. *Willamette Week* personals manager Jennifer Kent tells *Just Out* that pressure

mounted via the public demonstrations was a major factor behind the change.)

PBA has also sponsored a "Bisexuality 101" workshop designed to educate people about bisexuality and shatter some of the stereotypes around that orientation, and has orchestrated a rally in Pioneer Courthouse Square. The event, Bi Day '97, was designed to bolster bi visibility and generate a sense of bi community. Bonnichsen estimates 175 people turned out for the debut gathering.

"I think that was an important moment," he says. "Never before have so many bisexuals gathered in Portland's most public space.... I hope we can get all the bi groups to pull together Bi Day '98."

Despite that enthusiasm, there seems to be a sprinkling of tension in the bi community—a

the moniker of a widely recognized national bisexual group called BiNet USA, of which BiNet Portland is not a member.

BiNet Oregon treasurer and acting chair Kurt Geist says he's "concerned" about possible confusion.

BiNet Oregon, which is a member of BiNet USA, was established in 1992. The consensus-based group meets monthly and for the past five years has sponsored an annual regional gathering of bisexuals.

"Given the amount of [local] bisexual groups now in existence, I think we really need to focus on building a coalition," says Geist. "If we do that, the possibilities are very exciting. If we don't, well..."

BiNet Portland's initial meeting time, meanwhile, conflicted with that of another bisexual

outlets—a cafe or coffeehouse specifically catering to bisexual men and women.

"There just isn't anyplace like that," says Wills. BCF, meanwhile, is an informal social group that provides bisexual and bi-friendly people with an opportunity to schmooze.

"We are also a welcome wagon for people moving here, or for people who may be going through changes in a relationship," says Weiss, who totes a "floating library" of bi-related materials to each meeting for participants to sift through.

He says BCF meetings may attract anywhere from three to 10 people.

"We're a somewhat fragmented community," Weiss adds.

Melding fragmentation was part of the intent of Portland Bisexual Women, a local group providing social opportunities to bisexual and questioning women, says Deb Samuels, 48.

Samuels got the group off the ground three and a half years ago at the suggestion of It's My Pleasure owner Holly Mulcahey.

"I was talking about how great it would be to have a bisexual women's group and Holly said, 'Why don't you start one? You can have it here.'"

And that's exactly what happened. Portland Bisexual Women has been meeting at It's My Pleasure on Southeast Hawthorne ever since, in what Samuels describes as a "safe, comfortable setting."

She says the group gives bi and questioning women the freedom to simply talk and enjoy each other's company.

"Over the years we've developed a nice culture," she says. "Women come in and are really free to talk about what they want.... Those of us who are out don't pressure other women to come out or do something they're not comfortable with."

The group, she adds, typically steers clear of politics.

"Mostly women are satisfied sharing their own stories," Samuels says, though the group may focus on particular topics such as safer sex, relationships and "revisiting coming out."

Portland Bisexual Women occasionally hosts a guest speaker, among them state Sen. Kate Brown (D-Portland), who is openly bisexual.

"I think bisexual women have an ability to tolerate ambiguity and complexity," says Samuels, "because for many of us that's the nature of our existence. The world is set up for either heterosexuals or gay and lesbian people, not for people who could be with a man or a woman."



typical development with any evolving movement.

"I thought the bisexual movement was falling into disarray," says Adam Wills, 28, who became involved in bisexual issues in the early 1990s via BiNet Oregon, another local group. In 1995 Wills decided to launch the Portland Bisexual Alliance "to bring back some of the elements missing from the movement, like visibility of bisexuals."

Wills says, "I wanted to see us in the sexual minority mainstream."

To that end, PBA has been regularly represented at the Sexual Minority Roundtable with the Portland Police Bureau, as well as other queer-oriented events.

Recently, however, Wills left PBA to start a new bisexual group called BiNet Portland, an entirely separate organization from BiNet Oregon.

Some have questioned Wills' selection of the name "BiNet," since it could lead to confusion. Wills says he chose the name because it mirrors

group, the 17-year-old Bisexual Community Forum, a more loosely knit social group for bisexual men and women and bi-friendly folk.

So upset was BCF's Laury Weiss, he posted multiple copies of his group's meeting schedule at the site of BiNet Portland's gatherings.

"So people aren't confused," Weiss, 52, told us. "I don't know if Adam did this intentionally, but this is a very disrespectful thing to do."

The fledgling BiNet Portland initially met the second and fourth Wednesdays at Laughing Horse Books on Southeast Division at 7 pm. BCF meets the same nights at 7:30 pm at the Utopia Coffeehouse on Southeast Belmont.

Wills told us it was the only slot available and vowed to change the time as soon as an alternate slot opened up. (BiNet Portland's meeting time was ultimately changed to the first and third Thursday of the month, same place and hour.)

As for BiNet Portland's goals, Wills says he'd like to see the group organize an annual bisexual conference, as well as shepherd bi-oriented social

Bisexual Community Forum meets the second and fourth Wednesdays at 7:30 pm at Utopia Coffeehouse, 3320 SE Belmont St. For more information, call 285-4848.

BiNet Oregon meets the first Tuesday of the month at 7 pm at Laughing Horse Books, 3652 SE Division St. Call 622-5401.

Portland Bisexual Women meets the second and fourth Fridays from 7 to 9 pm at It's My Pleasure, 4258 SE Hawthorne Blvd. Call 283-6433.

Portland Bisexual Alliance meets the first and third Fridays at 7 pm at Laughing Horse Books. Call 775-9717.

BiNet Portland meets the first and third Thursdays at Laughing Horse Books at 7 pm. (No contact number is currently available.) Bisexual and questioning women within the anti-domestic violence community may contact Bradley-Angle House Bisexual Women's Caucus at 232-7805 or 282-9940.