

local news

When Anna Ellendman thinks about the music created by long-time folk/pop performers Cris Williamson and Tret Fure, one description immediately comes to mind—excellence.

"Their work is of such high quality and has been for so many years," says Ellendman, treasurer and concert coordinator for the Corvallis Folklore Society, a nonprofit arts organization situated in a city often touted as one of Oregon's more progressive and cultural enclaves.

Given Williamson's and Fure's professional accomplishments—the two have worked singly and together on more than a dozen albums and attracted sell-out audiences for several years—the Corvallis Folklore Society was more than delighted to book the duo for an upcoming concert.

"Quite simply, they're wonderful," says Ellendman, adding that the society books between 20 and 30 concerts annually featuring a wide array of music and performers.

She can recall no occasion where a performer was turned away—until now, that is.

"Our first reaction was shock, then it was embarrassment for our community," she says.

Williamson and Fure, who not only perform together but are also life partners, had tentatively been slated to perform on March 6 in the 402-seat theater of the Ashbrook Independent School, a non-religious college preparatory school in Corvallis.

According to Mike Meyer, a member of the Corvallis Folklore Society and producer of this concert, the facility, which can be rented for public performances, "is absolutely beautiful with state-of-the-art acoustics."

He says rental negotiations were moving smoothly until school officials balked at concert promotional materials which mentioned that Williamson and Fure are "life partners."

"I was asked to remove that wording. I said no," he tells *Just Out*.

Meyer says he then requested to see the school's rental policy, which was drafted as a result of this incident.

In a letter to Meyer dated Nov. 30, school headmaster Dave Gore writes, in part: "You expressed...an interest in our policy towards rental of the school premises, and so I have enclosed a copy. The proposed use by Cris and Tret appears to fall under the unacceptable listing No. 2 in that it would use the school as a platform for promotion of a sexual orientation. We arrived at this conclusion after you stressed to us the importance of the sexual orientation information used in their promotional materials."

That policy read, in part, "School is not the place to promote or publicly attack sexual lifestyles. If the Anti-Gay Alliance or Oregon Citizens Alliance wants to promote their views in our theater, we will not rent it to them. We also

The show will go on

Promotion of the 'gay lifestyle' becomes an issue regarding a lesbian duo's Corvallis concert date

by Inga Sorensen



Cris Williamson and Tret Fure

avoid entertainment that blatantly ridicules or endorses gay lifestyles. We are not concerned with the sexual orientation of the renters, we are concerned only with the intent to use the school as a platform for promotion of a sexual orientation."

Promotional materials sent to Ashbrook from Meyer comprised detailed professional biographies of Williamson and Fure.

A few personal tidbits are included in those bios, among them mention that when "Cris is not singing or writing, she's teaching songwriting and leading healing workshops. Otherwise, you'll find her with Tret...in their garden." And "When [Fure's] not crisscrossing this country promoting a new release, building a barn, writing or gardening, you're likely to find her cooking something gourmet—for Cris."

Gore declined to speak with *Just Out*, but he is quoted in a Dec. 6 Associated Press report as saying, "Our feeling was if their sexual orientation were just an incidental thing, not something central to their performance, they wouldn't mind having it deleted. If it is something that's central to their performance, there was a question as to whether this is family-style entertainment."

Tam Martin has served as the duo's booking agent and artistic representative for 16 years.

She says contrary to Gore's take on the situation, Williamson and Fure were in no way going to "promote" homosexuality while at Ashbrook.

"They were going to perform a collection of their hits over the years—that's all," she says. "Sure they are partners, and they're certainly not going to hide that fact, but they're also not going to be up on stage recruiting."

Meyer, meanwhile, calls this "a clear case of discrimination [because] the application was denied on the basis of [the duo's] sexual orientation."

He is particularly disgusted with the rental policy crafted in response to the incident.

He proceeded (as an individual, not a society representative) to file a complaint with the city maintaining that the school violated Corvallis' 4-year-old ordinance which bars discrimination in housing, employment or public accommodations based on race, religion, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation or source of income.

Prudence Miles, the city ombudsperson, says Meyer may very well have a case.

According to Miles, while Ashbrook may be a private school, it is making its facilities available for nonschool-related activities, and thus its actions become subject to public laws.

She says she is working with the concerned parties to hammer out a resolution before the matter gets more sticky than it already is.

With respect to finding a resolution, the Corvallis Folklore Society's Ellendman says three points must first be met: "We want the school to come into compliance with the law. It should also make an information sheet available to potential renters outlining a nondiscrimination policy—and, when the policy is changed, we want the school to make sure the public is aware of the fact [Ashbrook] is in compliance with the nondiscrimination ordinance."

According to Ellendman, since the uncomfortable unfolding of events, Ashbrook has offered its theater back to the society at a reduced rental rate and with no required censorship of promotional materials.

Despite the offer, Meyer says the concert will likely occur at a different venue.

Miles, meanwhile, says she is conducting some "shuttle diplomacy" in an effort to seek resolve.

However, she says when she spoke with Gore, he "didn't really seem to get it."

Miles says Gore made the argument that the policy was equitable because it barred anti-gay rhetoric, as well as promotion of sexual orientation.

"I tried to explain that if you're going to allow [renters] to be blatantly heterosexual, you must allow them to be openly gay, too," she says, adding that Ashbrook has since scrapped its rental policy and suspended renting its theater while it creates a new, nondiscriminatory policy.

"I think we'll be able to work it out in this way," says Miles, who calls this "the first glaring case" involving the nondiscrimination ordinance since the measure's implementation a few years back.

"I think it's important to point out in most places this wouldn't be an issue because discrimination like this wouldn't be illegal," she says. "Having this on the books can make a big difference."

For their part, performers Williamson and Fure, who live in Marcola, Ore., offered comment regarding the brouhaha through Martin.

"Cris and Tret applaud the Corvallis Folklore Society for standing up for human rights," she says. "They also say this scenario proves that gay and lesbian rights continue to be an issue here in Oregon."

At press time, Williamson and Fure were tentatively scheduled to perform on Saturday, Feb. 28, at the Majestic Theatre in downtown Corvallis. For more information, call Mike Meyer at (541) 758-3243.



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