

SITTIN' AROUND TALKIN'

By such small steps major changes have begun, and Pride Northwest hopes this time talk can heal deep wounds by Inga Sorensen

Kristan Aspen remembers vividly the divisiveness created by 1992's Ballot Measure 9, a statewide initiative that sought to constitutionally declare homosexuality "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse."

"There was a lot of damage done," says Aspen, a longtime activist who currently serves on the board of Pride Northwest Inc., which organizes Portland's annual Pride parade and festival. "Many people walked away from that campaign wounded."

Wounded, she says, by others who supposedly were allies in the struggle against the Oregon Citizens Alliance's measure.

And Aspen is certainly not alone in her assessment that many queers—trans and leather folks, people of color, anyone "who didn't look and act like a straight, white banker"—were essentially shunted aside and discouraged from too-public involvement in the 1992 campaign, as well as a similar campaign two years later.

Some critics say it was a "sanitization strategy" that further degraded and ignored already marginalized sectors within the queer community.

Whatever one's take on the matter, the fact remains that many feelings were hurt.

"We'd like to begin to heal the wounds," says Aspen.

Toward that end, Pride Northwest recently received two grants from Equity Foundation to implement its "Conversations Project," slated to begin at the end of March.

The mission statement reads: "Through the Conversations Project, Pride Northwest... intends to engage our community in dialogue to promote understanding, communication, inclusivity and respect for differences. By coming together in small groups we can create safe spaces to listen to each other, learn from each other, heal our divisions, and help weave a stronger community."

According to a project fact sheet, there will be three levels of conversations.

A conversation begins with two people from an identified constituency group and two people from the queer community at large. A facilitator will be present to keep the conversation focused and safe for all involved.

After two to four meetings, the conversation will expand "in a way that is comfortable for the constituency group, including more members of that group and not more than an equal number of members from the queer community at large."

After a maximum of six meetings of the larger group, the "constituency group will plan a public presentation with the invited support and/or participation of the other members of the conversation."

New conversations may be started at any time, depending on the availability of facilitators and funding to pay for their services. The first rounds of conversations will take place between members of the transsexual and trans-

gendered communities, and members of the African American gay men's group, Brother to Brother.

The ground rules stipulate that participants speak from their own experiences, listen respectfully without interrupting, and give each group member a chance to speak. There are to be no personal attacks, and the content of the conversations are not to be shared in any way that identifies individual participants.

Pride Northwest hopes the effort leads to "greater appreciation for the diversity of our community" and a "reduction of barriers between community groups trying to work together."

In addition, the project aims to increase confidence and self-esteem among participants. The first rounds of conversations are expected to run from eight to 12 weeks.

According to Pride Northwest's grant proposal, the Trans Conversation Project goals seek to "develop a genuine unity in our community through improved knowledge of issues relevant to transgendered and transsexual people; increase understanding between individuals and groups which are either alienated or unfamiliar with each other; and develop a model for teaching respect and communication between participants across lines of difference."

It further states that the project "will allow for exploration of differences between us as well as discovery of the commonalities we share. If we do not take the time and make the effort to listen to and include representatives from the transgendered and transsexual communities within our larger queer community, we will continue to face the problem of unity being possible only when there is a threat to the majority from the outside."

Facilitator Alanna Hein says she sees hope in this initiative.

"It's always exciting to break through the isolation, and hopefully that's what will happen," she says.

Nyla McCarthy, who plans to facilitate future sessions, adds the timing couldn't be more fortuitous.

"Given the political landscapes locally and nationally, we will want to unify," she says.

The OCA and Oregon Christian Coalition are gathering signatures for a new anti-gay, anti-trans ballot measure poised for the November ballot.

"There are a lot of people who have something to say," says McCarthy, adding that it's amazing what can transpire when people "have meaningful roles."

Another facilitator, Lori Buckwalter, agrees: "I'm very enthusiastic. Voices are being added that have not been heard from before."

■ For more information about the CONVERSATIONS PROJECT, call the Pride Northwest Hot Line at 295-9788.



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