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— Justice Louis Brandeis



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Speak Out

Merger worth exploring, top slot needs pondering

TO THE EDITOR:

I am greatly encouraged to hear that Right to Pride and Basic Rights Oregon are seriously considering a joint merger of their organizations ["Political Potpourri," *Just Out*, June 5]. There is wisdom in combining the groups' areas of expertise and talents, especially for fund-raising purposes.

However, I am stunned beyond belief and appalled that Jean Harris, the executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, has the audacity to blatantly state she expects to be the person to head up the merged organizations. Choosing an executive director is the responsibility of a board of directors and, in this case, probably the combined boards of both groups.

This is no easy task. Searching for candidates and carefully weighing their qualifications is an arduous process. This decision often takes months and is accomplished only after a long process of reflective consideration and deliberation of many applicants. Knowing this, where does Jean Harris get the egoistic attitude that she is already going to be the chosen one to ascend to this position? The joint task force of both groups has only recently been formed to begin considering the possibility of a merger, which may or may not happen, and yet this executive director already proclaims she expects to be its head.

Harris also states, "We're all being tight-lipped about [the possible merger] because we want it to be a positive process."

I cannot even begin to understand the logic of such a statement. Is she implying that the process will be positive only if everyone is tight-lipped? Or are we to conclude that it is going to be a negative process if everyone is not tight-lipped?

On the contrary, this is the time to be very open-lipped with the gay and lesbian community by letting them know precisely what process is going to be used in making a decision to merge and in choosing a new executive director.

Harris' statement of ascendancy to the executive director's position, meanwhile, sounds like the decision has possibly already been made or verbally agreed upon, unbeknown to the community. Such a statement seriously brings into question the credibility of both RTP and BRO.

Since both groups consistently tap gays and lesbians for donations throughout the year, the community has a justified right in expressing what they would like to see in a new executive director. I encourage RTP and BRO to reach out to the community to solicit this type of input.

JOSEPH L. GARDNER
Astoria, Ore.

Editor's note: As we went to press, *Right to Pride* announced it would remain an independent organization.

She'll be missed

TO THE EDITOR:

I don't know exactly why JoAnna McNamara committed suicide ["Trans Activist Dies," *Just Out*, July 17]. Often there is no one reason but multiple factors involved, with one representing the last straw. JoAnna was in pain from Crohn's disease. She was also increasingly lonely. When I first heard of her death, my gut reaction was that her loneliness in the face of bodily dysfunction was the primary cause of her decision. Whatever the reason, I will miss her a lot.

Since her death, I have thought a lot about what brings people to kill themselves, particularly trans folks. I doubt there are many trans

folks who have not considered suicide at one time or another in their lives.

It's too easy to say, "Oh, trans people who kill themselves are driven to it by an unaccepting society," or to blame it on losing various relationships after coming out to loved ones. Those kinds of problems can be sources of severe heartache, but to blame them for suicide is not appropriate. Suicide is not caused by external events, but by a person's reaction to those events.

There's a pop psychology saying that suicide is a long-term solution to a short-term problem. This is an oversimplification. Suicide is the result of perceiving a short-term problem as an insoluble, permanent problem, or of perceiving a problem of any duration as intolerably life-encompassing.

And this is precisely why trans folks are at such high risk for suicide: Being trans is life-encompassing. Sometimes it doesn't take much to throw us off-center, disturbing the balance of our minds sufficiently that we no longer perceive life's problems with sufficient perspective to take them in stride.

Identity formation is a tricky thing for the trans person. As a trans man, I grew up with female pronouns and a very improbable feminine name. Society gave me a prescribed identity based on my perceived gender. It never fit me very well.

At 40, I began the process of changing that identity at its source, through changing my perceived gender identity. While I am much more comfortable as Reid, and with being called "sir" in the grocery store, the fact of growing up with an inappropriate identity took its toll on me. I can never take my identity for granted.

This heightened degree of consciousness about something that should be unconscious is not natural. It requires a greater degree of strength than many people have, to be able to live with this heightened consciousness on a daily basis. It's tiring, at times.

On the other hand, this awareness is also the key to feeling grateful for life itself. As I can't take my hard-won identity for granted, neither can I take life for granted. The trans person who has faced too many disappointments, however, may find this consciousness of life turning negative over time. Rather than being grateful for life, life itself comes to feel like the source of one's burdens. This change in perspective is gradual, a sneaky thing, difficult to guard against.

The suicide of a fellow trans person always brings the challenge to the fore again, hitting home like nothing else can. I cannot take my life for granted. I cannot take my love of life for granted.

REID VANDERBURGH
Portland

OPB cool with me

TO THE EDITOR:

Lest *Just Out* readers think that Oregon Public Broadcasting is a place where diversity and First Amendment rights are not honored or supported ["Media Moments," *Just Out*, June 19], I would like to respond.

While one person chose to trash copies of *Just Out* from our lunchroom, scores more spoke out against the actions of this self-appointed censor, including Debbie Rotich and Maynard Orme. E-mails spoke to this "mad trasher" as directly as possible, saying, in effect, "Knock it off." It was encouraging, thrilling even, to read these messages and to realize the level of support my colleagues give to freedom of speech and diversity.

I know Debbie Rotich to be an open-minded, intelligent, sympathetic individual who

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