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LOCAL news

FROM ANGER TO ACTION

Lesbian couple works toward greater good

by Inga Sorensen

Ellen Osoinach was savoring the gorgeous March morning. "The sun was shining. The sky was clear. It was just beautiful," recounts the 27-year-old Northeast Portland resident.

Adding to her jubilation was the fact Osoinach had nabbed one of those rare mid-week moments alone with her partner of three years, Sally Sparks, 29.

The two, who were enjoying a little time off from work, decided to walk to a nearby bicycle store in their Concordia neighborhood.

"I was just so happy to be with her. It was such a treat," says Osoinach. The duo spotted a bike they liked, and left to go home to get the checkbook.

The couple stood on the curb, hand in hand like so many couples in love, waiting to cross the street. Then, says Osoinach, a man in a car "came screeching to the curb."

She says, "He came really close to hitting my girlfriend—I had to yank her back." Osoinach says the man, "who looked like he lives at Gold's Gym," got out of the automobile, at which point she said, "Hey, you almost hit us."

Next thing she knew, the man was "coming at us aggressively," put his finger in her face, and began screaming obscenities.

She says he then shoved her. "I flew back about 4 feet and fell into some brambles. I was stunned. I had never been assaulted before."

The man lunged toward Osoinach again, prompting Sparks to jump in the way, and he shoved her.

By then, Osoinach had regained her balance and ran across the street to a local restaurant—an establishment she and her partner had frequented on a number of occasions—to phone police. Sparks was on her heels, as was the man, who followed them into the eatery.

"He was saying, 'Go ahead and call the police.' He called us 'fucking dykes.' He said something like, 'My day was fine until you fucking dykes came along,'" Osoinach explains.

She then asked restaurant employees if she could use the phone to call police. "I'm standing there bleeding and practically pleading," she says. "They told us they didn't have a phone. ... I know they do because I call and order from them."

Shocked, but undeterred, Osoinach and Sparks exited to find a pay phone on the street. Again, the man followed them, but this time he got into his car. However, upon seeing the women calling for help, he jumped back out and grabbed the phone from them.

"Luckily there was another phone next to it," Osoinach says.

The call was placed. The man tore off in his car, but not before Sparks got the license plate number.

Portland police arrived, and says Osoinach, handled the situation very well.

"They were very diligent," she explains. "We were asked to describe any activities we may have been doing that may have prompted this man to think we were lesbians."

A Portland police bias-crime detective, meanwhile, called the couple "practically on a weekly basis" to update them on the investigation. The suspect was subsequently tracked down and interviewed by police.

"He apparently has a lengthy multistate arrest record, which includes violent crimes," says Osoinach, who admits she feared the perpetrator may learn her and Sparks's names—and residence—if they pushed for prosecution.

After a heart-wrenching process which had Sparks opting to pursue the matter and Osoinach saying nay, the two have decided not to seek prosecution.

Ironically, she represents HRC at the monthly meetings of the nearly year-old Coalition Against Hate Crimes, a group of Portland-area people from an array of human rights groups, businesses and religious institutions. The coalition in part acts as an advocate and voice for victims of hate crimes, promotes coalition-building and education, and "acts as an agent of change and healing."

Says Osoinach: "If this could happen to me—someone who is involved in these issues—I wonder what people who aren't activists feel when they are confronted by hate crimes."

Though Osoinach selected not to pursue the case legally, she is taking action in other realms.

Following the incident, she was left hurt by the response, i.e. the lack of help, she received from the local restaurant, which she declined to name.

"We want to work with that business and other businesses to find ways they can be responsive and responsible," says Osoinach, who has started attending Concordia Neighborhood Association meetings.

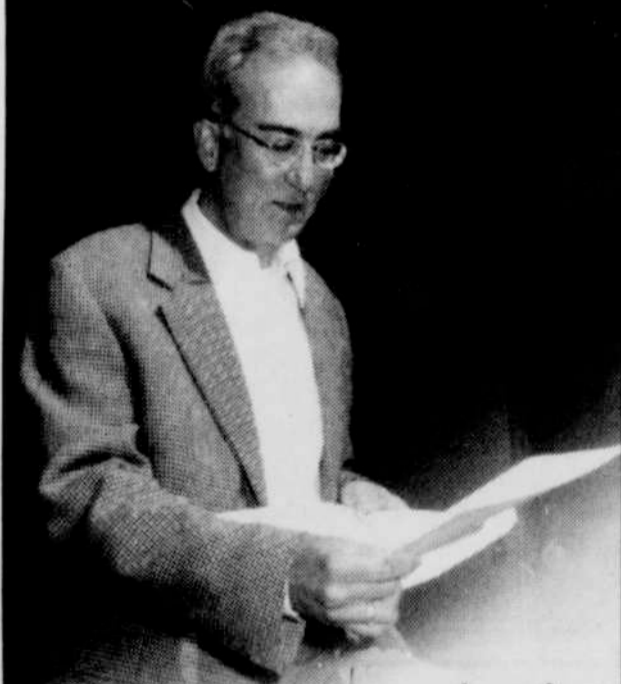
She says the group's previously-defunct safety committee has since been jump-started, with



Ellen Osoinach (left) and Sally Sparks revisit the site where they were allegedly assaulted

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

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"She wanted to prosecute and I didn't," Osoinach says. "Maybe it wasn't rational. What were the odds he would come after us? Still, I was afraid that would happen given the violent history."

She also says if the man had been convicted on the bias-related intimidation charge, he would have seen little, if any, time behind bars.

"These are people who said, 'I thought I lived in a gay-friendly neighborhood,' but heard about what happened to us and decided to get involved."

—Ellen Osoinach

"We would not teach this guy a lesson," she concludes.

The decision was an "extremely difficult" one, adds Osoinach, not only because she and Sparks diverged on the matter, but also because of the responsibility she feels toward the queer community.

Osoinach's commitment to the community manifests itself in part through her work as a congressional district coordinator for the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay and lesbian political organization.

a few local queer folk joining.

"These are people who said, 'I thought I lived in a gay-friendly neighborhood,' but heard about what happened to us and decided to get involved," she says, adding, "We're looking to make Concordia a hate-free neighborhood."

Osoinach is also currently spearheading an effort to create a support group—via the Lesbian Community Project—for queer people who have been the victims of hate crimes and homophobic discrimination.

Steve Freedman is the interim program manager for the Metropolitan Human Rights Center, a city of Portland and Multnomah County entity which provides education, and community networking and problem-solving.

Freedman knows Osoinach through their work together on the Coalition Against Hate Crimes.

"She called me soon after the attack and was very distraught," he says, adding they talked about her options.

"She is heroic. She has refused to be a passive victim," he says. "She has chosen to be active and has taken a negative experience, turned it around, and made it into something positive."