

SPEAKING OUT ABOUT FREE EXPRESSION

Pride Northwest gets input as it tackles tough questions about trans, lesbian, bisexual and gay pride by Inga Sorensen

"I don't come to pride to see Mr. Rogers." Not surprisingly that comment, provided by Lesbian Community Project staff organizer Deke Law, generated copious guffaws from around the room.

Despite the humor, Law was underscoring her conviction that queer pride should be allowed to flourish freely in its myriad manifestations, be they political, sexual, grass-roots, establishment, outrageous, mellow. Sanitizing it to appease the straight-laced, she seemed to be suggesting, would zap energy from an event that some say already needs an infusion of verve.

Law, along with about a dozen other folks, had accepted an invitation from Pride Northwest Inc., the group that orchestrates Portland's annual queer pride parade and festival, to offer thoughts to the board as it works to develop a freedom of expression policy for the pride and National Coming Out Day celebrations.

Twenty community organizations were mailed invites; representatives from about half showed up for the Oct. 27 meeting at Portland State University. Those who did appear represented Equity Foundation, Lesbian Community Project, *Just Out*, Imperial Sovereign Rose Court, Radical Women, Trans-Port, Lesbian Avengers and the Community of Welcoming Congregations.

The other invited guests (the American Civil Liberties Union among them) were no-shows.

"Controversy occurs regularly [at pride]," explained Pride Northwest's Carmella Ettinger. "Not every year, but regularly."

The group's 10 board members, she said, were eager to hear from a broader community spectrum as they struggle to "promote freedom of expression as much as possible and still do our best to keep our gatherings comfortable and supportive for as many members of our community as we can."

A flap over free speech ensued at the most recent pride, held in June.

The brouhaha occurred when a Pride Northwest board member suggested to Portland queer-girl comedian and performer Carol Steinel that she rethink her plans to crank out her controversial ditty "I Want to Put My Fingers in You."

A year earlier, during a pride-sponsored event the night before the 1997 parade, Steinel performed the song. As always, she issued a verbal disclaimer, letting the audience know the song includes some frank talk about lesbian sex.

The ditty starts off: "Some people talk of fill-

ing up and spilling over, some people want you to light their fire. I'd say those things, but they wouldn't be true, cause I just wanna put my fingers in you. I like to squeeze your nipples, like to grab your ass. I like to go down on you... I like to take your clitoris with my tongue and manipulate it carefully until you come."

Prior to this year's pride festival, Steinel received a form letter from Pride Northwest that specified her emcee assignment. It also included a hand-written note to Steinel from board member Janna MacAuslan, who wrote: "Carol—Last year we got a call from someone who was very offended by your 'I Want to Put My Fingers in You' song. The theme this year is 'Family Mat-

riticized Coors' corporate sponsorship of the event. At the time, Baggadonutz was a slated emcee though not an official representative of Pride Northwest.)

The Steinel situation not only raised the ire of a few people, it also raised questions about the meaning of pride. Who is it really for? Is it for queers celebrating their diversity, or is it designed to present a palatable face to straight onlookers? Who decides whose act or prose or dress is suitable for presentation? Does the embrace of diversity include performers, like Steinel, who celebrate their queerness in part by acknowledging the sexuality that comes along with it?

Which circles us back to the Oct. 27 meet-

Parent Jes Nelson suggested a detailed schedule be distributed so people would have a better idea of which acts were slated to perform when. In other words, give them a heads-up so they can remove themselves and/or their children from the stage area during an act they may have concerns about.

Radical Women's Jordana Sardo, meanwhile, criticized a restriction on leafleting at pride, and said some pamphleteers have been "verbally abused" by Pride Northwest security.

"We were told we couldn't hand out leaflets and, to us, this is censorship.... It's a bad policy," she said.

In response, Christopher Webster, a Pride Northwest board member, said a city ordinance was to blame for the restriction.

Other issues brought up included concerns about the police presence at pride, booth fees—which some say hinder smaller grass-roots groups from participating in pride as fully as they should—and the event's increasing lack of a political focus.

Law, who is relatively new to the Portland area, said of pride events in general: "It saddens me that most of our pride committees say they are not political."

The modern day queer rights movement was launched on outrage, resistance and pride. Instead of being a "parade," said Law, it should be a "march."

Longtime socialist-feminist activist Adrienne Weller advanced a similar belief.

"I would like to see [Pride Northwest] choose more political themes," she said.

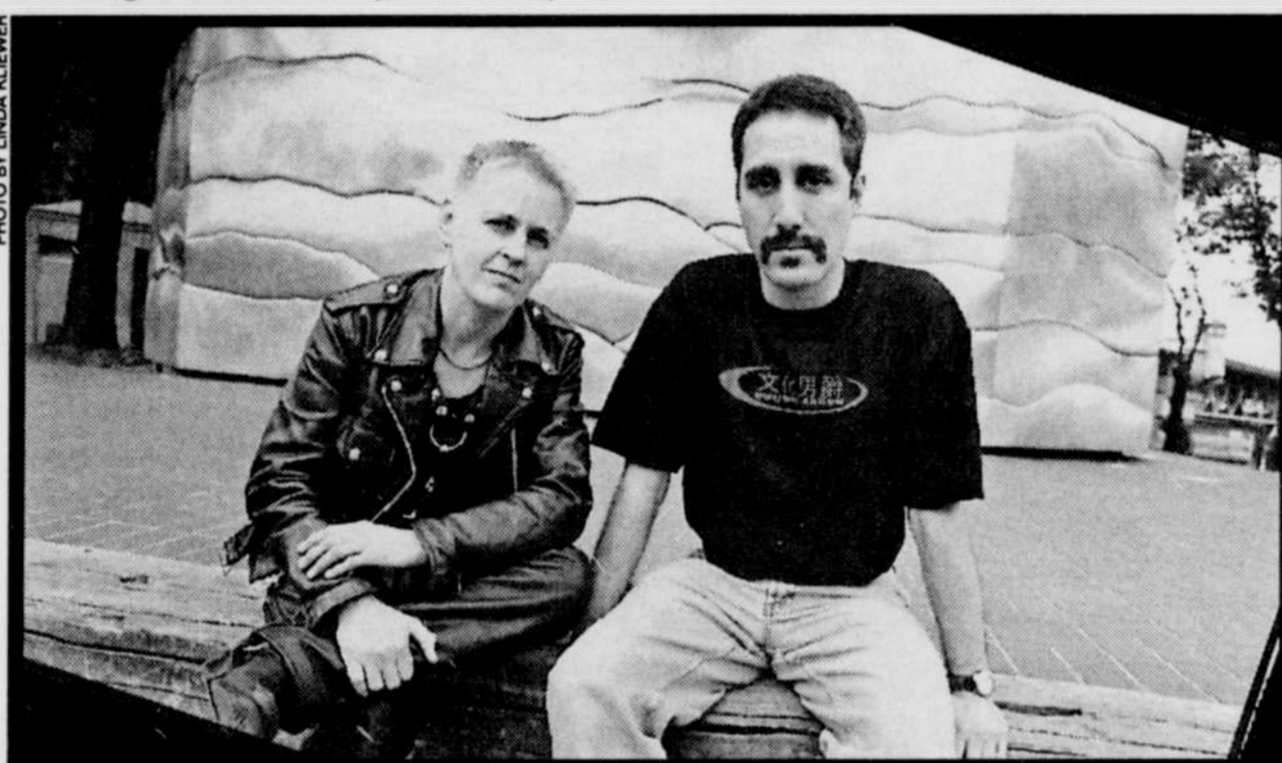
Pointing to the beating death of Matthew Shepard, Weller noted "things have gotten better and they have gotten worse."

She called for a "theme that sticks with the issues of the day," as well as a greater diversity of "political perspectives and directions."

At meeting's end, several of the guests thanked the board for providing them the chance to share their thoughts. Whether similar gatherings will be held before Pride Northwest crafts a freedom of expression policy remained a question mark.

A statement that popped up more than once at the meeting, however, is a sure bet: With roughly 20,000 men, women and children attending Portland's pride events, you won't be able to please all of the people, all of the time.

■ PRIDE NORTHWEST INC. can be reached at 295-9788.



Carol Steinel (left) and Howie Baggadonutz

ters' so do what you think is appropriate to the theme. I don't want to be censoring you, but do what you can, OK?"

"I was shocked and I definitely feel like they were trying to pressure me to censor myself," Steinel told *Just Out* back in June.

She wasn't the only person offended by the experience. Longtime queer activist Howie Baggadonutz—who had participated in Portland pride in some capacity for nearly two decades—withdrawed his support from pride because of the incident and his feeling that Pride Northwest was "picking and choosing who the bad guys were."

(Baggadonutz, you may recall, surprised many when he took to the podium during the 1997 Portland queer pride rally. While there, the longtime activist publicly and vehemently

ing, where ruminations on these tough questions were batted about.

"We should emphasize our diversity and how tolerant we are," said Tom Ruckman of the Community of Welcoming Congregations. "Perhaps we could have a theme focusing on how proud we are of our own diversity."

Many agreed, saying pride is the community's moment to celebrate itself—not a time to quash the drag queens, the sexuality enthusiasts, flamboyant lyricists or others who claim the sexual minority rights movement as their own.

Indeed, when someone recounted a "dildo march" that unfolded at pride a few years back, Kristin Teigen, Equity Foundation's executive director, chimed: "I'd get up early for that."

Some meeting participants did acknowledge the growing presence of children at pride events.



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