

LOCKED OUT?

University of Oregon administration rejects gay dorm proposal by Tim Joyce

Matthew Woodburn sits at his computer near the window of his fourth-floor room in Carson Hall.

"I really didn't want coming here to blow up in my face," says the 19-year-old college student. "I was really careful to make sure history for me didn't repeat itself."

Openly gay since he was 12, Woodburn's senior year at Portland's Lincoln High School was devastating due to a scourge of harassment, which included graffiti and death threats; the abuse prompted him even to ponder suicide.

"It was horrible, but I'm glad it happened to me because I'm strong and I fought back," he says.

Woodburn took a year off, and then entered the University of Oregon in Eugene. He wondered whether being openly gay would cause a stir with other students—like a roommate, for example—but was happy to find otherwise.

Indeed, the only conflict he found with his straight roommate centered on who took out the trash and recycling.

"I was extremely lucky," he says.

A student coalition pushing for more than a year for a gay dorm on the University of Oregon campus doesn't consider itself so fortunate: In mid-January, university administrators rejected the proposal.

"We're all kind of refocusing on getting over the fact that we lost this one," says Jason Wicklund, co-chair of the PRIDE Hall Committee.

PRIDE is an acronym for Providing Residents Interested in Development and Education, which promotes a safe, supportive environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans students and their allies.

More than a dozen special interest halls already exist at the University of Oregon, including the self-explanatory Cyberhall, Quiet Hall, and Substance-Free Hall.

Whether a single floor or an entire wing, the PRIDE Hall Committee wanted to add a safe haven for queer students to the list of housing options.

While the university housing director, Mike Eyster, was considering the committee's proposal, a campus newspaper article unleashed a flood of media attention on the issue. Administrators then made a decision.

"Diversity is one of the University of Oregon's greatest strengths," said the university's vice president, Dan Williams. "By segregating students in residence halls in this way, we run the risk of breaking down rather than enhancing that diversity."

And, says Eyster, "Residence halls primarily are for entering students. While it's true many freshman are deciding their orientation, many sitting at their parents' kitchen table filling out a housing application their senior year of high school aren't willing to make a commitment to a [gay] hall."

But he adds: "I'm always open to ideas on

how to do things better. These students are dedicated to trying to make this campus a more welcoming place."

PRIDE Hall Committee members say they plan to continue working with the housing department to address problems related to homophobic roommates, housing staff with unsympathetic ears, and security.

Merging the PRIDE Hall concept with the existing Multicultural Hall is one of many possibilities. However, committee members say that program lacks a mission statement and couldn't address specific queer concerns.

They add, however, they are not ruling anything out.

"Our whole focus is advancement," says Wicklund. "These issues will not go away by themselves. We'll find something palatable to housing and the school as a whole."

Some queer folks think the committee should stop trying.

"College is supposed to open your mind," Grace says. "It's not about making a safe, cuddly womb for people to fester in for four years. It's the time when straights and gays should learn how to live together. Given our political climate, it's the duty of every queer to be an ambassador, if you will, to show straight people we're just like them. Granted, that's not easy, but who ever said life is easy?"

Although gay dormitories are rare—only about a dozen exist nationally—3,000 miles from soggy Oregon, a gay dorm is getting high marks.

Among the Colonial brick buildings at the University of Massachusetts you'll find the seven-year-old "2 in 20" residence program. The housing director, Michael Gilbert, says the program's name originates from studies that claim one in 10 people is gay.

He says this housing option continues because it works. The gay dorm takes up about half of a larger hall, and is one of more than 30 special interest halls on the University of Massachusetts campus.

One full-time, live-in staff person—who is openly gay too—watches over the population, which fluctuates annually between 50 and 100 students.

Gilbert admits the University of Massachusetts is atypical, with 11,000 of the estimated 18,000 undergraduates living in university housing. Only four universities in the entire country can boast a higher percentage of students living on campus.

"The reality is, it has very little impact on the overall diversity on campus," Gilbert says. "If you believe the one in 10 statistic, there are hundreds of gay students living in more mainstream environments. We also have 50 engineering students living in a hall together, but that isn't robbing the campus of people encountering a student majoring in engineering."

For his part, Grace, who grew up in Eugene, says a gay dorm would increase "the likelihood that it wouldn't be a safe place."

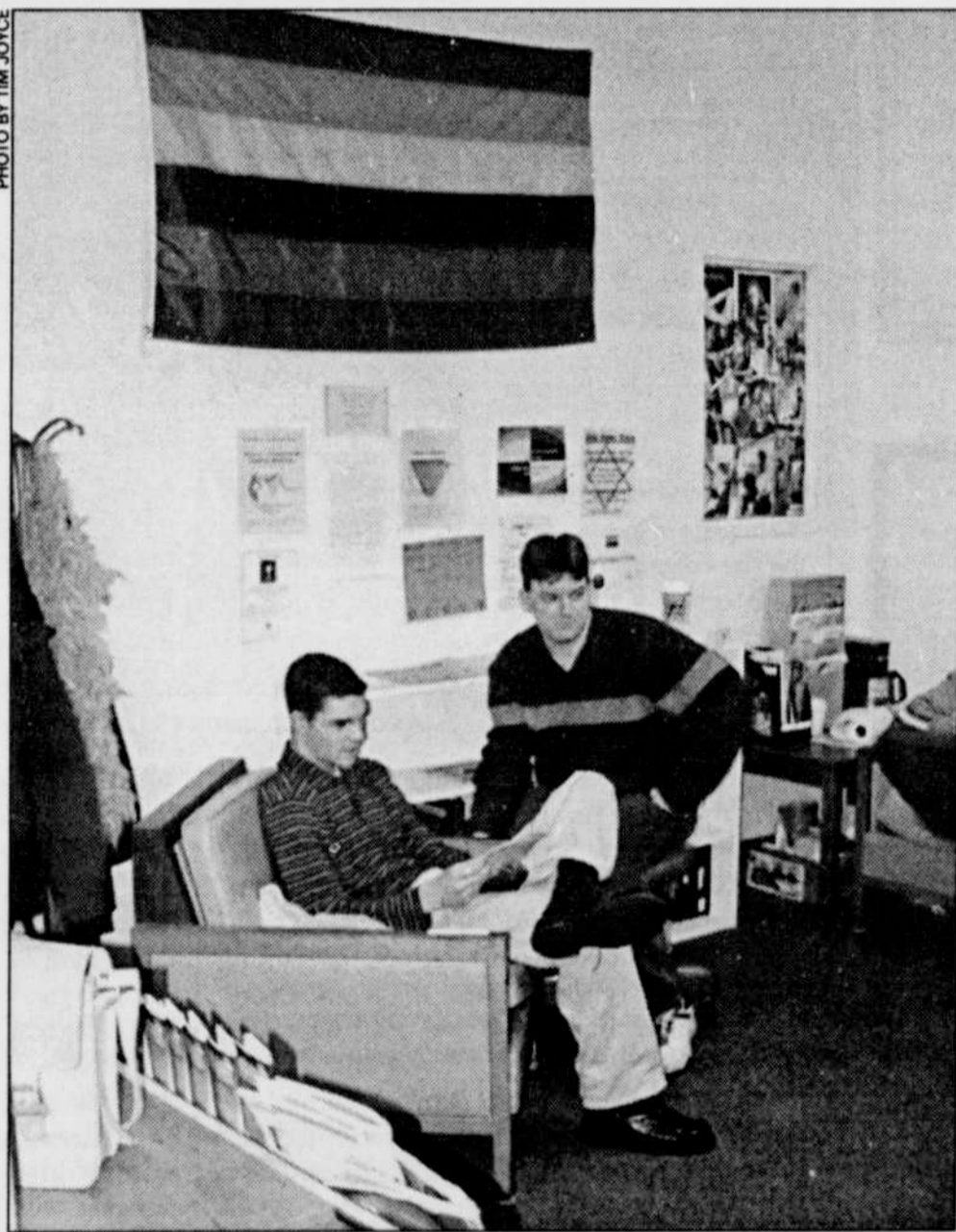
He says: "People play up that Eugene is a liberal college town—but I think they're all talk. This would provide an easy target for homophobes."

Isolated incidents aside, the University of Oregon can boast

many tangible successes when it comes to acceptance. With only a few hours notice this fall, hundreds gathered with flickering candles at sunset in front of the student union to memorialize Matthew Shepard, a gay student brutally murdered in Wyoming.

Meanwhile, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgendered Alliance is a long-standing, accepted group on the campus. The group hosts dances, a gay and lesbian film festival, and a pride celebration.

The University of Oregon is also home to the region's only fraternity for gay men. While its membership remains small, Delta Lambda Phi was welcomed into the existing Greek system in 1996.



Matthew Woodburn (left) hanging with a fraternity brother at the office of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgendered Alliance

"It's called 'segregation,'" says former University of Oregon student Kavi Grace. "You might remember [that] we tried it in this country until the '60s. Well, this is even worse because we'd be doing it to ourselves."

Grace is sitting in his office in a converted warehouse in Portland's Pearl District. The Web-systems engineer had his first homophobic encounter as a student in 1995. He lived at the University Inn, a tall concrete monstrosity of apartmentlike living.

"In magic marker, someone scrawled the word 'fag' on my door and then used papers to light a fire there in the hallway," Grace says.

While the 22-year-old admits feeling angry and vulnerable, he calls a gay dorm a step in the wrong direction.

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