

Nothing seems special about Carson Hall on the University of Oregon campus—unless one looks closely.

If the students crossing through the busy residence hall lobby fail to distract you, you might notice the pink triangles and rainbow stickers on several of the tiny mailboxes that cover a whole wall. The lighted panel at the top of the elevator's interior might clue you in more: "fags and dykes" has been scribbled there twice this year, near the illuminated button for the fourth floor.

"It's more or less just living," says sophomore Jason Wicklund.

"It's a safe place to live," adds sophomore Chris Wolter. "That's what's important to me."

The two friends just wanted to live in the same hall with other friends. They didn't know they'd help create a compromise between university officials and gay and lesbian students who were advocating for their own dorm, which they had planned to call Pride Hall.

Wolter and Wicklund live in the University of Oregon's first "gay cluster," which consists of two lesbians and four gay men, all out and living on Carson Hall's fourth floor. There are no activities geared specifically to this small, yet pioneering group, or to address specific gay concerns on this floor of 50-plus students.

"We don't do beach trips," laughs Wicklund. "Oh yeah," says Wolter with a grin, "there is that group orgy every month. That's fun."

Equal signs and rainbows decorate doors, and thus far, all seems to be running pretty smoothly. Part chance and part design, this living situation is something the university wants to duplicate.

"I'm not ignorant about this matter," says University of Oregon administrator Dan Williams.

He's sitting at the end of a long row of people at the front of a university lecture hall for a forum addressing gay-related housing issues at the Eugene campus. The occasion marks the unveiling of the gay cluster concept—and the first time administrators have spoken out since they sank the Pride Hall idea earlier this year.

"The university is walking a fine line here. We want to address the issues of gay and lesbian students without violating the university's principle against segregation," he says.

The administration contends it's OK to group people by common interests—like the Outdoor Pursuits Hall and Cyber Hall. University officials say those are based on personal preferences. They contend, however, that a gay, Hispanic or African American dorm is too narrow a focus and would center on students' unchangeable personal characteristics.

"There is a difference," argues Williams, "and

GAY CLUSTERS

A new breakfast cereal or a queer-friendly living concept at the University of Oregon? by Tim Joyce



Chris Wolter (left) and Jason Wicklund in their Carson Hall dorm room

there is a value in students learning from each other. If everyone is divided up, I think we lose that opportunity to learn from one another."

Most in this particular crowd seem to feel the gay cluster concept is an unacceptable alternative. Some cite the need to specifically address psychological and physical safety issues; others say the concept is a proverbial closet.

"[Coming out] is an issue that comes up in mostly college-age people," says Robin Holmes, who is with the campus counseling center.

"The most common scenario is hetero roommate and questioning student," she says. "There really, really is a fear that they're with someone who will not understand what they're going through. It's one thing for the university to say, 'We're supportive.' It's another thing for the university to show that support. The more support we can show without just lip service, the better."

Sign-up forms for housing for the next school year have already hit the mailboxes of returning students and are ready to go out to incoming freshmen. A diversity statement accompanies a housing department phone number to help place students in gay clusters.

"I'm hopeful," says housing director Mike Eyster, whose reasons for opposing the Pride Hall proposal are more functional than philosophical. He doesn't think a solely gay wing would have many takers.

"I just couldn't see many high school students filling out their housing forms at their parents' kitchen table and checking the box for the gay dorm," he explains.

Eyster has been working with a student coalition to find a middle ground. He says putting lesbian and gay students in clusters is a happy medium, letting students come out on their own terms.

"This is a tough, serious issue for all of us," he says.

"It's a step in the right direction," Wolter confirms.

Both Wolter and Wicklund were out to their parents shortly after graduating from high school, but remained fearful of being openly gay at the University of Oregon.

"I was terrified my freshman year," says Wolter. "I was so nervous, that's why I got a single room. I also asked to be on the Academic Pursuits Hall, because I thought smarter people would be more accepting. I think I lucked out."

Both students say how a person comes out can greatly affect his or her academic and social development in college.

"I wasn't accepted in my dorm," says Wicklund, who is active in the university's queer student group. "I certainly didn't feel comfortable."

He adds: "But, now I'm really out. I'm a professional."

The two friends are moving off campus next year, mostly because they say two years in a residence hall is enough. While both favor a more formal Pride Hall, they hope the cluster idea works.

"If it's anything like this year," says Wolter, "I think it will."

WE ARE FAMILY

It's April 24, a sunny Saturday, and several dozen people are seated around the tiny carpeted amphitheater in the University of Oregon's student union basement. Some are cross-legged and leaning against the risers, others are sprawled out. No matter what the physical configuration, all are listening.

"Don't self-edit.... Ask for what you want and need," urges Harriet Merrick of Basic Rights Oregon, a gay political organization.

This is an easy crowd to work for Merrick and Jean Harris, BRO's executive director. Most are queer college students, and they're attending a political seminar—one of many workshops offered during the Northwest Regional Queer Conference.

Other seminar titles include "Why Whips and Chains Excite Me" and "Your Fence Is Sitting on Me!" The workshop topics address, among other issues, health, identity, academics, sex, activism and relationships.

More than 200 people make their way to the Eugene campus for this confab; they travel from as far away as California, Idaho and Alaska for the "third" annual event.

"We know there was a first annual, but no one knows where," laughs event co-chair Peter Larson. "The second one was canceled for a lack of publicity. Technically, this is the first—but we thought we'd give it some history."

Organizers say this happening was inspired by a conference in the University of California system. The goals for both are to reduce heterosexism and homophobia, build regional ties, and create stronger leaders for the future.

Overall, reviews of the Oregon gathering are positive. Still, many folks point out the need for greater college activism.

"I think there's definitely a need," says Andrew Haddleston. "Apathy is what allows right-wing groups to pass these [anti-gay] ballot measures."

Haddleston is a senior at Whitman College in eastern Washington. The small private school of 1,300 in Walla Walla boasted the greatest single delegation, with a dozen students attending.

Meanwhile, it's not all work for conference-goers. The organizers dress up the auditorium and dim the lights for a dance. With the feel of a high school prom, people bounce to the heavy bass beat, and go wild at the last song of the night, "We Are Family," which, not coincidentally, is the conference's theme.

■ Reported by TIM JOYCE

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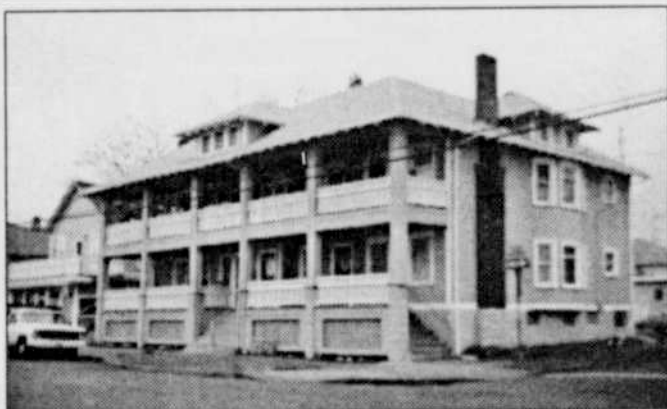
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