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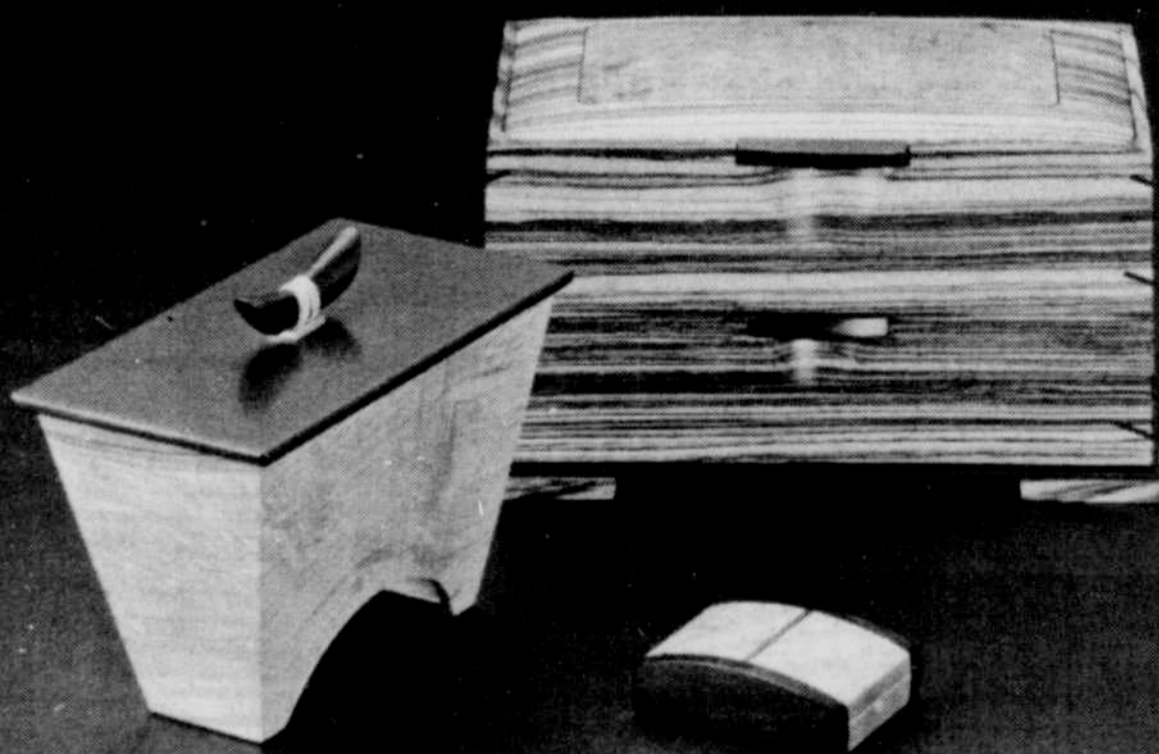
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LOCAL news

LOW-INCOME LEVERAGE

Love Makes a Family's low-income project connects sexual minority families to social services by Michael Barrett

One evening in early May, a handful of sexual minority parents are plunked down in a Northeast Portland church where they weigh the pros and cons of being an out family.

All agree that being out encourages pride and self-affirmation within the family unit, which is an important aspect of gay and lesbian parenting; still, some parents admit they feel the need to downplay their sexuality in certain situations.

Some parents even skip their children's school-related activities because of concerns about homophobia. The parents of adolescents note that sporting events in particular often seem ominous.

One mother, who asked to remain anonymous, complains of what she describes as "a generic jock homophobic environment [encouraged by her] son's football coach, a member of the [Oregon Citizens Alliance who] made a lot of homophobic remarks during practice."

The situation was so extreme that her son asked his mother not to bring her partner to his games.

Another parent says that when she came out of the closet, she displayed her pride by placing bumper stickers on her car.

"People threw eggs at my house and my car, and my kids got harassed [for having a lesbian mother]," she says, adding that she felt compelled to choose between pride and the safety of her children. She removed the stickers.

Other parents, meanwhile, say they are adamant about remaining open about their sexuality.

"If you can't behold your lesbianism as a beautiful, valuable thing, your children will pick up on that," says Shez, a mother of one.

David, a father of two, echoes her sentiment. He fears sending mixed messages about his sexuality to his children "by being hesitant... because they will grow up being hesitant about it themselves."

But one mother counters: "I don't want to shove anything in their face, like 'I'm queer' or 'I'm a lesbian.' I just want to be an effective parent. It's not about me, it's about being a mom."

Greg Thompson, a Franklin High School counselor and a gay parent, is the meeting's facilitator. "You make decisions based on your own environment and reality," he explains. "And you play different roles according to the situation."

The meeting—sponsored by Love Makes a Family, a Portland-based organization for sexual minority families—includes participants from gay and lesbian families from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Some attendees are from the organization's "low-income sexual minority family project." The pilot project, funded by the city of Portland, aims to address the needs of low-income sexual minority families.

Kerri Dee, a graduate student of social work at Portland State University, works with the project. Her job is to find families in need who

qualify for the project and build a support network among them.

She has helped parents access child care and legal resources, and assisted them with the red tape of the welfare system.

On the project since last fall, Dee has posted flyers at various social service agencies, bookstores, bars and other locations. Still, there are currently only seven families in the program, which is funded for 10.

"Recruiting families is the most difficult part of my job," Dee says.

Despite that, Bonnie Tinker, executive director of Love Makes a Family, says her orga-



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BARRETT

Kerri Dee

nization "determined there was a need [for this project] via personal experience among staff...and from meeting other families in need."

On this night in early May, sexual minority families of all income levels are sharing their thoughts.

"After all, no matter what our income, we have to deal with many of the same issues," Tinker says.

But she also acknowledges that low-income families encounter special difficulties.

"Low-income families lack the resources middle-class families have that allow them to insulate their children [and] build support networks," she explains.

Having a chance to come together can alleviate some of the stress and provide low-income families with a vital network base.

While Portland is considered relatively progressive with regard to sexual minority issues, suburbs and rural areas offer a stark contrast—and the situation can be particularly bleak for low-income parents outside urban boundaries, says Marcy Westerling of the Rural Organizing Project, a nonprofit organization that works with human dignity groups in rural and small-town Oregon.

Lower wages and fewer job opportunities notwithstanding, Westerling says, "gays and lesbians are already economically vulnerable because they face possible discrimination at work based on their sexuality, and they do not have the legal protection found in cities."

Given all that, any support—especially for those sexual minorities strapped with financial constraints—is critical, she and Tinker say.

Though the city's funding is a one-time deal that is winding down, Tinker vows: "We're committed to maintaining this project. We believe it's very necessary."

■ Sexual minority families seeking support may call LOVE MAKES A FAMILY at (503) 228-3892.