

A LOVING LEGACY

A longtime gay couple aim to bolster future generations through their generosity by T.K. Mantese

It was 1948 when Phillip Gibbons and Orville Garrison first met as fellow University of Portland undergraduates.

Both were psychology majors at the Catholic school, as well as recently returned veterans of World War II. Gibbons was 22 and Garrison, 25.

Because students were placed in the curriculum alphabetically, the duo shared some of the same classes. They began exchanging notes and meeting after class.

Gibbons says he assumed his sexual experimentation when he was growing up was typical for boys. He didn't know if it was evidence of homosexuality.

"Orville wasn't sure either, but I think he was more aware that he was probably homosexual," Gibbons says.

They continued to date, sometimes spending evenings after work at the Cupboard Backdoor, a lounge in the former Broadway Theatre building at Yamhill Street and Broadway in downtown Portland. It was a hangout for gay men, many of whom were Meier & Frank employees, as was Garrison.

A bisexual couple they knew would often drag them out to a club featuring female impersonators, which, quite honestly, did not interest Gibbons much, save for that fact that those excursions "opened up the gay orientation avenue" to him.

Gibbons left his dorm on campus and moved in with Garrison in the spring of 1949.

For nearly 50 years they lived together, excluding one year during which Gibbons lived in Salem while he served as a child welfare supervisor for Marion and Polk counties.

The couple pursued and earned their master's degrees in social work from the University of California at Berkeley.

"Gay life down there on campus was very open compared to the University of Portland. We worked like dogs, sweat blood to get through grad school. If you got a C, you were on probation," he recalls.

Both spent their subsequent careers helping others, particularly children.

Except for a short stint with Multnomah County Juvenile Court, Garrison spent his career in the adoption field. He was the director of Waverly Children's Home until poor health prompted him to resign in the early '70s.

From 1968 to 1973, Gibbons also worked at the children's home, developing a treatment program for disabled preschool kids.

Says Gibbons: "They had no program for these kids. They just fed them, held them, kept them clean."

He developed an innovative program that emphasized psychosocial rehabilitation.

"I could see things coming to fruition [at Waverly]," he says. "Educational and developmental programs for the developmentally disabled or severely impaired were unheard of."

Especially for the pre-school age, he adds.

Gibbons says his partner became well enough to work again, obtaining the ultimate job of his career—state director of the adoption program with Catholic Social Services in Portland.

The last dozen years of Gibbons' career were spent auditing nursing homes throughout the state and investigating elder abuse for Clackamas County. He retired in 1987.

At the age of 73, Gibbons still talks passionately about social work—and Orville.

"It's been a terrible loss. We'd been together just short of 50 years," he says.

Gibbons says he and Garrison thought about writing a letter to the university. Instead, when they received the school's annual request for alumni fund contributions, they responded that they were upset with the university's stance and asked to be taken off the alumni list.

After reading a recent *Just Out* article about gay and lesbian students currently struggling and organizing at the University of Portland, Gibbons sent an e-mail to one of those profiled in the piece, Kari Kruse, a founding member of Friends United to Educate Lives, a pro-diversity group at the North Portland school.

"I told her, 'I support what you're doing entirely—don't give up the effort,'" he says.

Gibbons says he and Garrison had considered setting up trusts for two local organizations that serve the queer community but "backed down because of the instability of both of them."

One thing they were sure of, Gibbons says, was that the University of Portland was "not going to get a penny."

Instead, the Garrison Gibbons Endowed Fellowship was established with Portland State University in March 1996. It became activated upon the death of Garrison two and a half years later.

The annual fellowship for a Graduate School of Social Work student at PSU will select its first recipient in April.

A spokeswoman for the social work department says the money for the scholarship comes from the interest on the trust, which will allow scholarships to be awarded in perpetuity.

The Garrison Gibbons Endowed Fellowship is currently funded at \$50,000. Though Gibbons is reluctant to say what his estate will eventually be worth to the graduate program (he has bequeathed everything to the school), it is safe to say it will easily exceed \$1 million.

This year, \$1,000 will be awarded. In 2001, the scholarship increases to \$2,500, according to a PSU spokeswoman.

Gibbons says the Graduate School of Social Work will eventually have the money for a guest professorship to teach courses

that specifically address queer social issues.

The PSU endowment agreement for the Garrison Gibbons fellowship sets requirements for the scholarship, which include "outstanding academic qualifications, demonstrated financial need and an interest in gay and lesbian issues." Preference will be given to students who have experience working with sexual minority clients.

Devoted social workers, Garrison and Gibbons have ensured that their commitment to improving the lives of others will live on through their fellowship.

Meanwhile, Gibbons is adjusting to life without his longtime companion. He remains committed to social work and volunteers at Providence Milwaukie Hospital.



Phillip Gibbons

Devoted social workers, Orville Garrison and Phillip Gibbons have ensured that their commitment to improving the lives of others will live on through the Garrison Gibbons Endowed Fellowship, established with Portland State University in March 1996

Garrison died Oct. 21, 1998, after 270 days in the hospital, having never recovered from complications of surgery for an abdominal aneurysm.

Several years before Garrison died, he and Gibbons talked about setting up a trust at the University of Portland because "that's where we met and fell in love," says Gibbons.

"A very dear mutual friend—known her for 45 years—had been after us since the early '90s: 'What are you going to do with all the money you're hoarding?'" he recalls.

It was around the same time, Gibbons explains, that some University of Portland gay students formed a group and applied for official club recognition. He says the university's administration declined to endorse the club because of the Catholic Church's stand on homosexuality.



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