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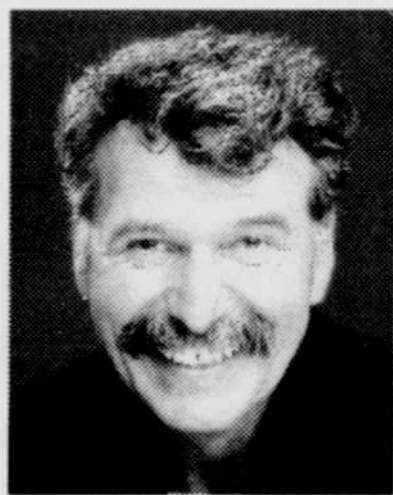
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1607 NE 41st Ave.
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A DEGENERES HELPING

Bring on Betty! Ellen's mom makes her way to McMinnville by Katy Davidson



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

A recent meeting of Fusion, Linfield College's gay-straight alliance

Twenty-two-year-old Melodee Smith makes activism look easy.

Last spring, when a few party-going female impersonators reportedly were verbally and physically harassed at a Linfield College fraternity, Smith urged the campus's gay-straight alliance, Fusion, to strike back with some proactive force.

"We wanted to bring in someone big," says the freshly graduated Linfield alumna.

After a year of hard work, Fusion will present speaker Betty DeGeneres—who could be dubbed America's favorite queer-friendly mom—on April 1 at the McMinnville Community Center.

Betty will kick off Linfield's "Sexuality Week," in which Fusion and other campus groups will present speakers, workshops and safe-sex talks.

Fusion's original goal was to bring Betty's daughter, Ellen, former star of a self-titled sitcom and currently on the small screen in HBO's *If These Walls Could Talk 2*.

Smith says Fusion specifically sought out Ellen because of the performer's patented quirk-driven

humor and the guts she's demonstrated since coming out publicly.

"Ellen didn't have to come out on TV," Smith notes. "We like that she has accepted the fact that she's a role model."

But Fusion's hopes of securing Ellen were dashed—after eight months of planning, no less—when group members realized their budget had met its match—and lost.

"She wanted four times the amount her mom wanted," Smith says.

So Fusion turned to Betty.

After Ellen came out in 1997, Betty revitalized her career by becoming an activist for lesbian and gay rights. Betty, who says she did not even suspect Ellen was gay before she came out publicly, now speaks all over the country about the importance of diversity.

She also answers three questions a week in an Internet-based column called "Ask Betty" on PlanetOut. She tells *Just Out* that many of the

questions come from teen-agers seeking advice about how to deal with their parents.

"I recommend PFLAG so much, I sound like a broken record," Betty explains. "It's just a wonderful organization. I always say, 'Keep the lines of communication open, you never know when a parent will turn around.'"

As for the changes she has experienced in her own life since her daughter came out, Betty says: "My horizons have been broadened so much. I've met some amazing people—

if people from the extreme religious right could meet the people I've met, I think they'd abandon their beliefs completely."

Though she now lives in Los Angeles to be closer to her children, Betty is no stranger to rural communities. She's spoken at smaller colleges where much of the question-and-answer periods were filled with inquiries regarding the Bible.

Two years ago, she traveled through rural Oregon with lesbian activist Candace Gingrich on an equality

tour sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay and lesbian political group. This time around, Betty will deliver in McMinnville a lecture titled *Unity through Diversity*.

Smith says one of the most special parts about bringing Betty is that she will actually speak in McMinnville, not in Portland. Whereas many queer Portlanders believe their city to be somewhat of an epicenter of community action, Fusion knows the importance of having Betty speak where many people might not otherwise be exposed to her.

"We thought about holding it in Portland, but we knew that not everyone has a car," she says. "We wanted to bring her to a small community."

Jeff McKay, Linfield's former activities director, reiterates Fusion's desire to bring Betty to an otherwise out-of-the-way community.

"They wanted to bring a speaker that would address GLBT issues not only to the students,

but to all of Linfield and the greater Portland community," he says.

McKay has been providing organizational guidance since Fusion first sought out a prominent speaker; he taught the group to take into consideration security and ticket sales, as well as other logistical items on the to-do list.

To bring Betty to McMinnville, Fusion has worked in conjunction with several campus and community groups, including Linfield's multicultural programming board, activities board and student senate.

Smith, who first got involved with Fusion when she was a freshman, says that during the last four years the group has evolved drastically to mirror the student body.

"The campus diversity has grown so much even since my freshman year," she says. "Now Fusion is a gay-straight alliance, not just 'the gay club.'"

In fact, out of a student population of 1,800 at the Baptist-affiliated college, Fusion is now one of the most active groups on campus.

And bringing Betty to McMinnville is Fusion's most notable achievement to date.

Says Smith: "We hope she will reach the parents and families."



Betty DeGeneres

■ BETTY DEGENERES will deliver her lecture, *Unity*

Through Diversity, at 7 p.m. April 1 at the McMinnville Community Center. Tickets cost \$8 to \$26. For more information, call (503) 434-2685.

KATY DAVIDSON is a Just Out staff writer who practices stand-up comedy in her spare time so she can one day achieve a self-titled prime time sitcom—just like Ellen.

GAY-FRIENDLY ACTION

The Portland City Council voted 5-0 on March 15 to join a friend-of-the-court brief that favors requiring the Boy Scouts of America to admit gay men.

The brief is before the U.S. Supreme Court, which is slated to hear arguments in *Dale vs. Boy Scouts of America* at the end of April.

James Dale is the New Jersey scoutmaster who was removed from the Scouts after the organization learned he is gay. New Jersey courts subsequently ruled the organization is a public enterprise that may not discriminate based on sexual orientation.

Portland city officials have an interest in the *Dale* case because a ruling backing the Scouts' gay ban could perhaps undercut the city's civil rights ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing and public accommodations.