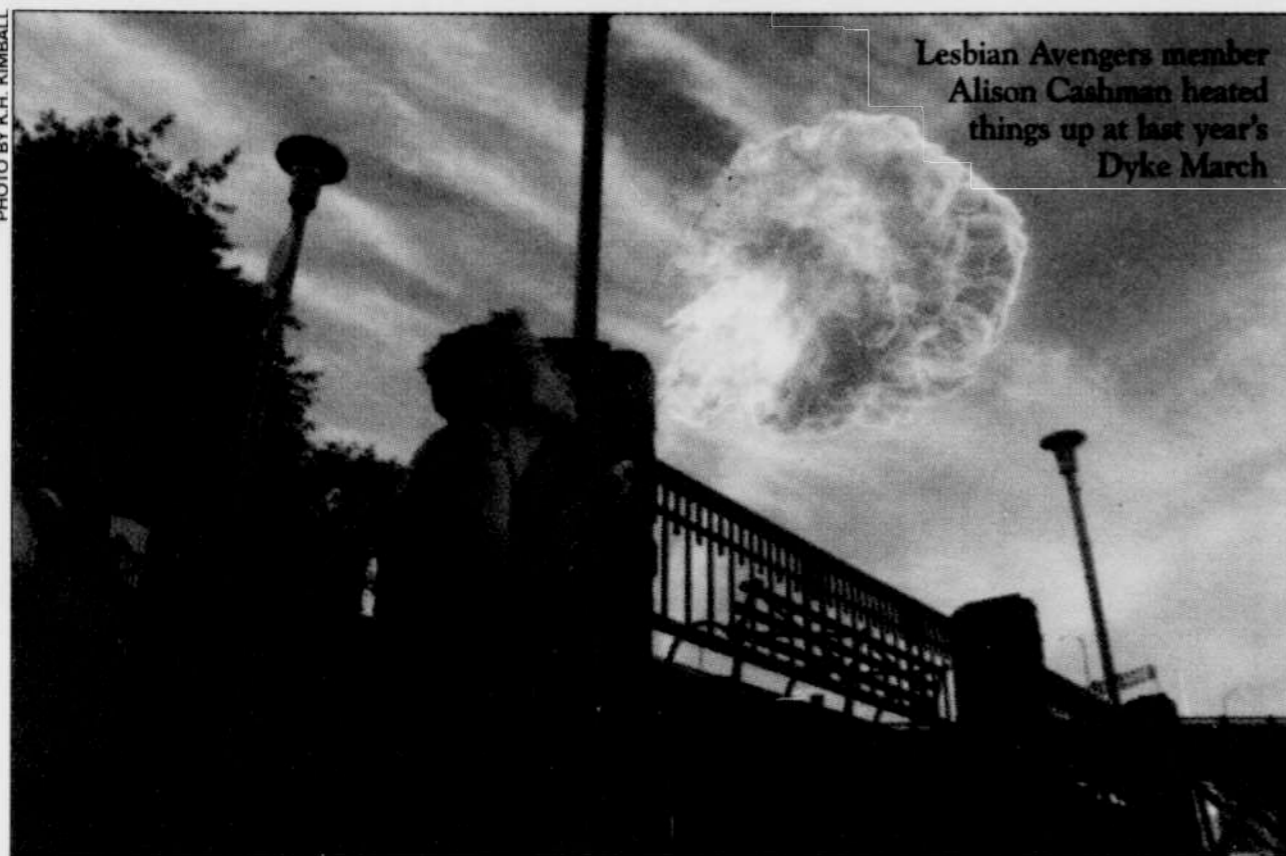


DIVE RIGHT IN

Lesbian Avengers test the activism waters once again—and the group is ready to strike at a moment's oppression by Katy Davidson



Lesbian Avengers member Alison Cashman heated things up at last year's Dyke March

We need more women—not for our own amusement—but we can't take over the world with 10 people.”

So notes Item No. 6 on the agenda of a recent Lesbian Avengers meeting.

A glance around the somewhat stark Portland State University classroom shows there are, as the agenda accurately describes, exactly 10 people present.

Given that one of the Lesbian Avengers' main objectives is to “subvert the dominant paradigm,” this bunch is—ironically—pretty subdued, at least on this particular night.

The Lesbian Avengers is a national organization founded as a direct-action group in the early 1990s. Though the group is known for its theatrics in trying to subvert the dominant paradigm, the Lesbian Avengers' mission statement is a serious one that expresses a desire for the survival and visibility of lesbians, bisexual women and trans dykes.

The organization has grown exponentially since it was formed, and now there are chapters in cities and towns across the United States.

Because of the Lesbian Avengers' outward nature and no-fear policies and protests, members of the group are often stereotyped as big, scary dykes. This PSU classroom, however, is filled with an array of folks, wearing ball caps and carpenter jeans, work boots and skateboard shoes; some sport groovy-colored hairdos.

Though the official purpose of the meeting is to plan this June's Dyke March, these young women have also come together to end the hiatus the group has been enduring since last year. (A Portland-area Lesbian Avengers group has sprouted and then seemingly evaporated a few times over the years.)

One girl suggests a reason for the Lesbian Avengers' more recent inactivity: “People just aren't being oppressive enough.”

The group snickers in reply.

Erin Sexton, a deceptively innocent-looking Avenger who joined the group in October 1998, backs up this analysis and says it is one of the reasons the group hasn't been as much a public presence as usual.

“Living in Portland, there aren't many things to protest,” she says.

In a spurt of activity two years ago, the Lesbian Avengers went high-profile by protesting,

among other things, the Eugene gathering of the Christian men's group Promise Keepers, as well as Exodus International, a group that aims to help gay men and lesbians exit the so-called “homosexual lifestyle.”

The Lesbian Avengers of Portland also became known for fire eating.

“We like to do attention-getting things,” explains Sarah Barnard, a spiky-haired dyke who has been a member of the group since 1997.

Lack of fuel hasn't been the only cause of the group's downtime. Both Barnard and Sexton say several active members moved away at the same time last year, just as some other members were busy and burning out.

Says Barnard: “We stopped meeting because people got busy with work, school and other activism.”

Sexton adds: “We're such a loose-knit group, we don't have any officers or anything. It takes people a lot of energy and commitment to get things going.”

Now that the coming Dyke March has poked its head up over the horizon, however, some of the old-school Lesbian Avengers are raring to get back into business.

According to Sexton, the Dyke March, which is traditionally held the night before Portland's pride parade, is the biggest lesbian event of the year.

“It's such a visibility march—people feel empowered just marching through the streets,” she says. “Some people like it better than the pride parade, because there's people eating fire and Dykes on Bikes and stuff.”

Last month, the Lesbian Avengers decided the planning of the Dyke March was a good way to increase participation. To get things going, the group advertised its recent meeting across Portland in hopes of bringing in some new faces. And to light a spark of interest in everyone who showed up, the members ended the meeting by going outside and eating fire.

“We're testing the activism waters,” Barnard says. “We're looking for something to piss us off so we'll get off our asses.”

■ To help plan the DYKE MARCH or for more information about upcoming LESBIAN AVENGERS meetings and activities, call (503) 452-5408.

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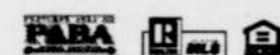


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