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NORTHWEST news

HOMO, HOME ON THE RANGE

For the sake of community, a small group conducts a survey of queers living in Washington's Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties

by Katy Davidson

Who says a gay life is a city life? Tucked amid the tree groves, mountainsides and meadows of southwestern Washington, Alan Rose has cultivated a secluded home that would give any city slicker a quick case of vertigo. To Rose, however, the country is sublime.

"My property is a sanctuary. When I sleep with my window open, I can hear the coyotes serenade me," says Rose, who used to live in Portland. "Now, city sounds kind of disturb me."

Somewhat nearby, Teija Heikkila and her partner, Peggy Barron, own five acres overlooking the Columbia River outside Longview.

The two had never met prior to enrolling in the class, but on the first day Rose guessed that Heikkila might be a lesbian.

"I'm never sure if it's my gaydar, or just my overweening hope," Rose says.

Since then, they have become friends. Both say they have gleaned some useful information from the course, but one negative, they note, was a diversity training session.

"It was worse than having none at all. It was based on so many stereotypes; it was really primitive," Heikkila recounts.

As a kind of subtle response, the two decided to center their class project around the subject of gay men and lesbians in rural areas.

Away from the bars, noise and pollution, this is the way of life that makes the most sense to them. Although public displays of pink triangles and rainbow flags are few and far between, Teija Heikkila, Peggy Barron and Alan Rose know they are not the only gay folk in this neck of the woods.

Away from the bars, noise and pollution, this is the way of life that makes the most sense to them. Although public displays of pink triangles and rainbow flags are few and far between, Heikkila, Barron and Rose know they are not the only gay folk in this neck of the woods.

As a joint project for the Lower Columbia Leadership Academy, Heikkila and Rose have decided to seek out the gay and lesbian population that exists in Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties and determine whether the community has needs and services that may not be acknowledged.

The academy, sponsored by Washington State University, is a yearlong course dedicated to developing community leaders.

Rose has been involved for a while in community organizing, mostly concerning HIV prevention. He says this class has offered him something different, with new challenges.

They say there has been a positive change in social attitudes toward gay men and lesbians recently, but rural-based queers might not benefit from this change as much as those who live in the city.

This inequity may be due to a deficiency of diversity and a surplus of conservative values in rural areas. Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and trans people may be more likely to experience isolation, prejudice and lack of community support in the country than in the city.

To see where queers stand in southwestern Washington, Heikkila and Rose have constructed a multidimensional survey for the people of their area. One part is fully confidential and directed toward the gay and lesbian community; the rest will be conducted over the phone with area churches, businesses and schools.

By creating this project, the two say they want to do something meaningful, and they

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