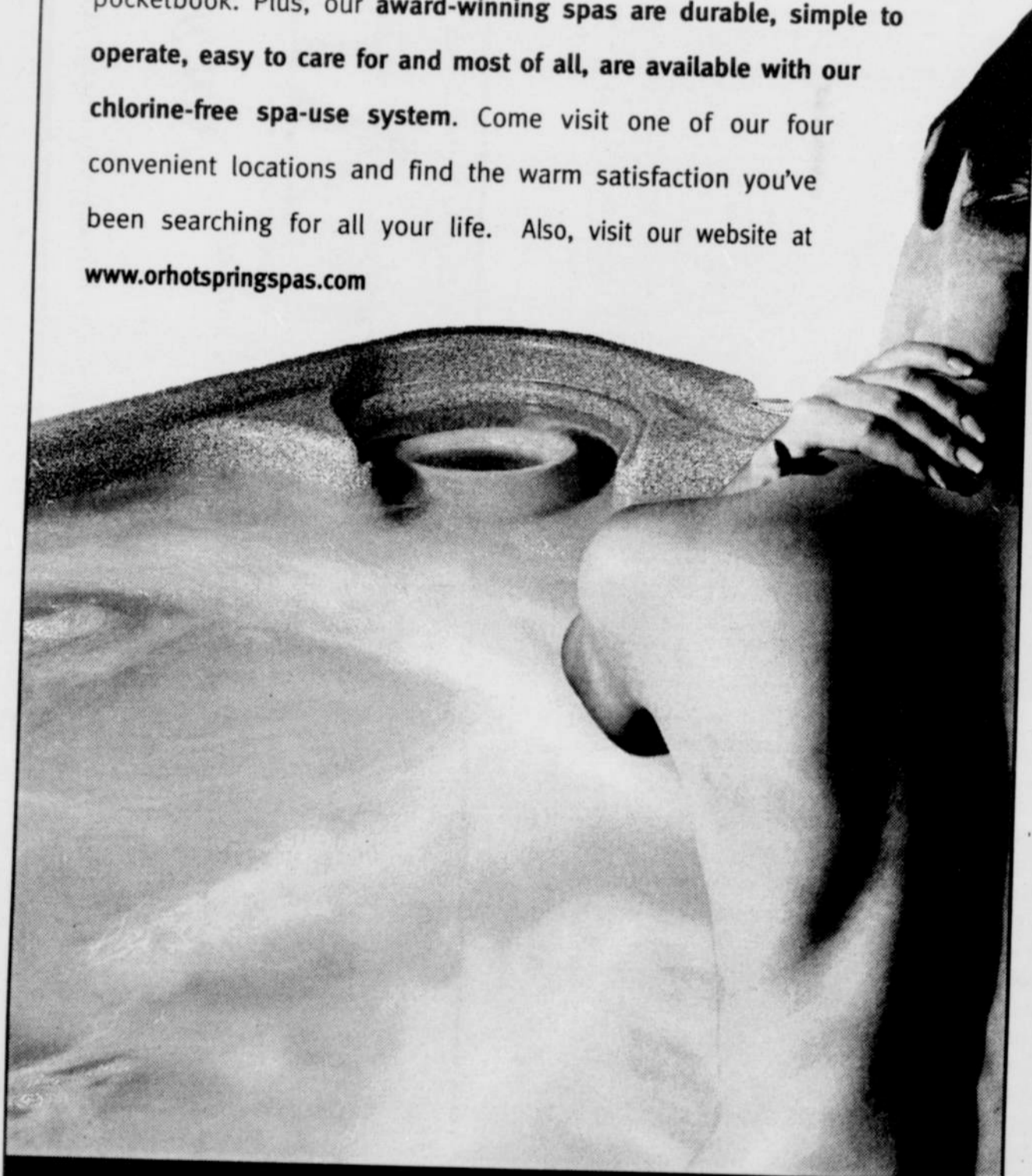


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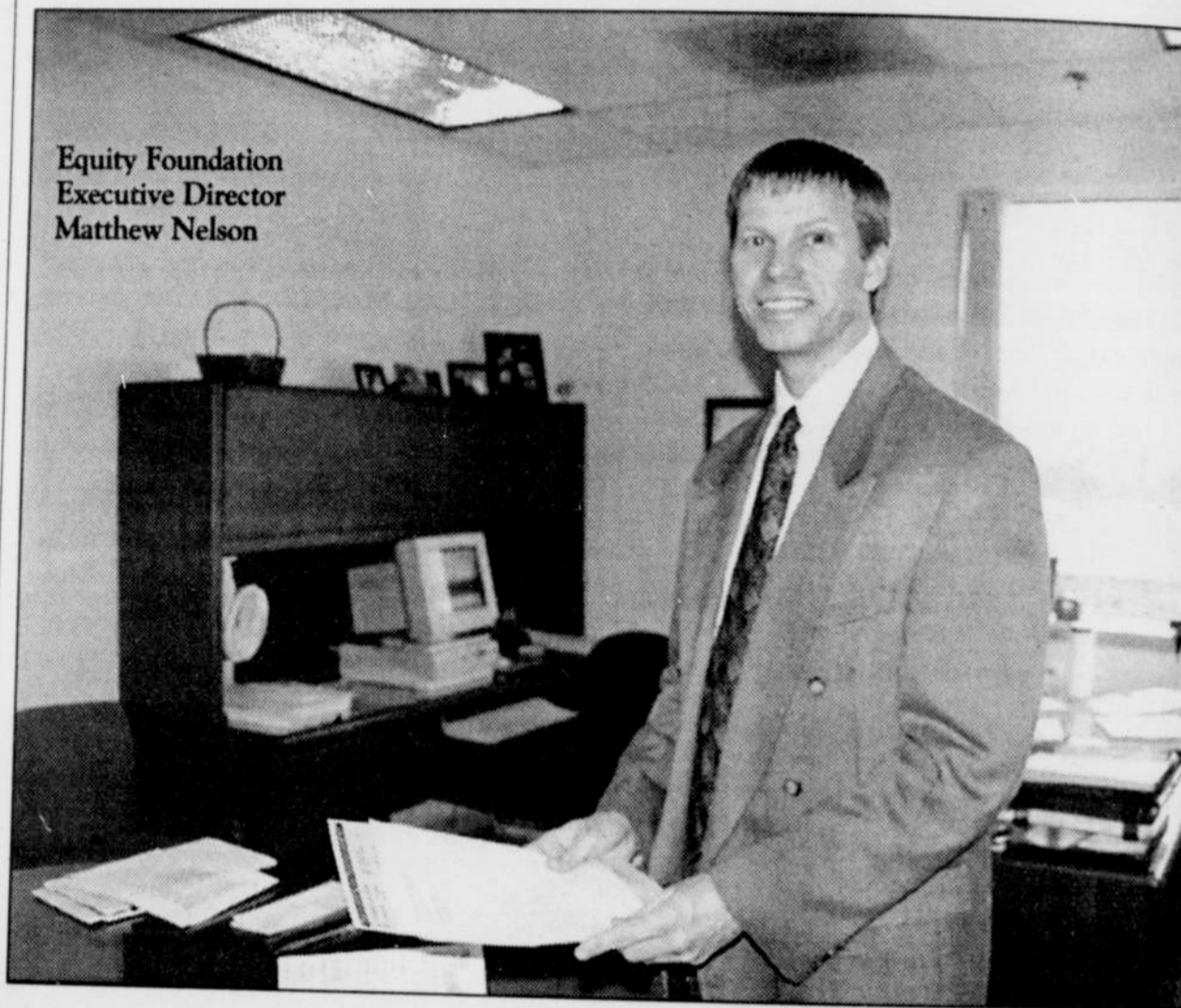
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**NORTHWEST news**

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

**Just Out checks in with Equity Foundation's new executive director**  
by Jonathan Kipp



Equity Foundation  
Executive Director  
Matthew Nelson

PHOTO BY MARIY DAVIS

**W**hether being paid or volunteering his time, Matthew Nelson has never been far away from the world of nonprofits.

"I want to make a difference," Nelson explains about his most recent career move.

After a six-year stint on Equity Foundation's board of directors (as a volunteer), Nelson was hired as the organization's executive director in April.

Equity Foundation is a grant-making nonprofit organization that works to promote social justice, education and the welfare of sexual minority communities in Oregon, and of people in general.

The organization was founded by a group of lesbian and gay Oregonians in 1989. Since its inception, the foundation has granted more than \$750,000 to nonprofit groups around the state. More than \$87,000 was distributed in 1999.

The new director once felt that Equity's vision was "absurd" and asked for too much. Nelson says the organization is committed to playing a leadership role in working for social justice for everyone. But now Nelson is convinced that Equity's high expectations are part of the solution to bring about real change. He says it is the reason he wanted the job.

"Why do we dream small?" 40-year-old Nelson asks. "Why do we not say, 'I want the Boy Scouts to now be welcoming of gay and lesbian folks. How can we help leverage that?'"

Nelson says the exciting part of his work is to challenge all the systems in the state of Oregon to be sensitive and open and welcoming of all people—including sexual minorities. Nelson, a minister ordained by the United Church of Christ, previously worked in administrative roles for the United Way and the Camp Fire Boys and Girls. His résumé of volunteer work is long and varied.

While living in Malaysia as a high school exchange student, Nelson began noticing the inequality in people's lives and started asking questions that would eventually lead him to social justice work. When he returned to his

native Minnesota, Nelson wondered how he could impact his country around those issues.

Years later, sitting in a community meeting attended mostly by gay men and lesbians, Nelson had a kind of epiphany that gave him the clarity he needed to continue the fight for his community.

Nelson met an elderly woman and asked her what brought her to the cause. Since she was at the meeting, he assumed she was close to someone who was gay or lesbian. The woman's response has stuck with Nelson.

"It's a civil rights issue. Every single person deserves the same opportunities...this is about justice!" Nelson says about the lesson he learned that evening. The issue is not just one of gay rights but of people's rights, he adds.

Originally, Equity's mission was to provide funding for the gay and lesbian community exclusively, but in 1994 Equity committed to making grants to organizations working for the betterment of the entire populace. While Equity's focus remains on the sexual minorities community, Nelson says grants are made to all kinds of groups.

"It's a balancing act," Nelson says about trying to work for the community at large while keeping focused on sexual minorities.

"Those historic roots to the LGBT community are never going to go away," Nelson continues, adding that more than 90 percent of the grants made are intimately connected to sexual minorities.

Annually, Equity assesses unmet needs in communities around the state. In 1999, Equity chose to focus on reaching out to rural organizations. Of specific interest to Equity were sexual minority youth and school safety.

Nelson says the goal was not only to provide grants to rural nonprofits, but also to connect with communities and organizations.

Last year the Gill Foundation, based in Colorado, challenged Equity and agreed to match "dollar for dollar," Nelson explains.

"The Gill Foundation likes to get connected to an organization and is willing to give it money every year for a couple of years," Nelson says.