

It was a late Saturday evening in Vancouver, and the smoke was thick. The stereo blasted familiar disco music; the dress code seemed to be the usual T-shirts and jeans. Those in attendance mingled in and out of smaller groups, talking and laughing while sipping their favorite alcoholic beverages. And, yes, there was the periodic glance at someone passing by who seemed appealing. But this was no bar or disco. This was Socialites Cosmic Bowling, and over 20 men and women attended the April 22 event near Fort Vancouver.

The SW Washington Gay & Lesbian Socialites, a group serving the gay and lesbian community since 1995, gets together twice a month, and membership is free. The group has hosted a wide variety of activities, including: visiting the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, jet boating on the Willamette River, attending a comedy club, seeing movies, watching professional hockey games, and camping trips. The Oregon Zoo will be the Socialites' next destination on May 27.

While many of those who attend the group's events are from Vancouver, some travel miles to join the group.

"Some people come from the other side of Mount Hood," Jesse Batz says.

Batz, one of the group's organizers, says he plans on traveling to Seattle and British Columbia to invite out-of-towners to the Socialites' annual summer fund-raising event.

Some members keep coming no matter what. Doug Polley lived in Vancouver several years ago and then moved to Portland, but he regularly returns to socialize with old friends and finds himself making new friends as well.

"Portland doesn't have a group like this, where you can get out and meet people like this. It's just an alternative to going out to the clubs and trying to meet people," Polley says.

While he didn't meet his partner, Tom Brannian, at a Socialites event, Polley has

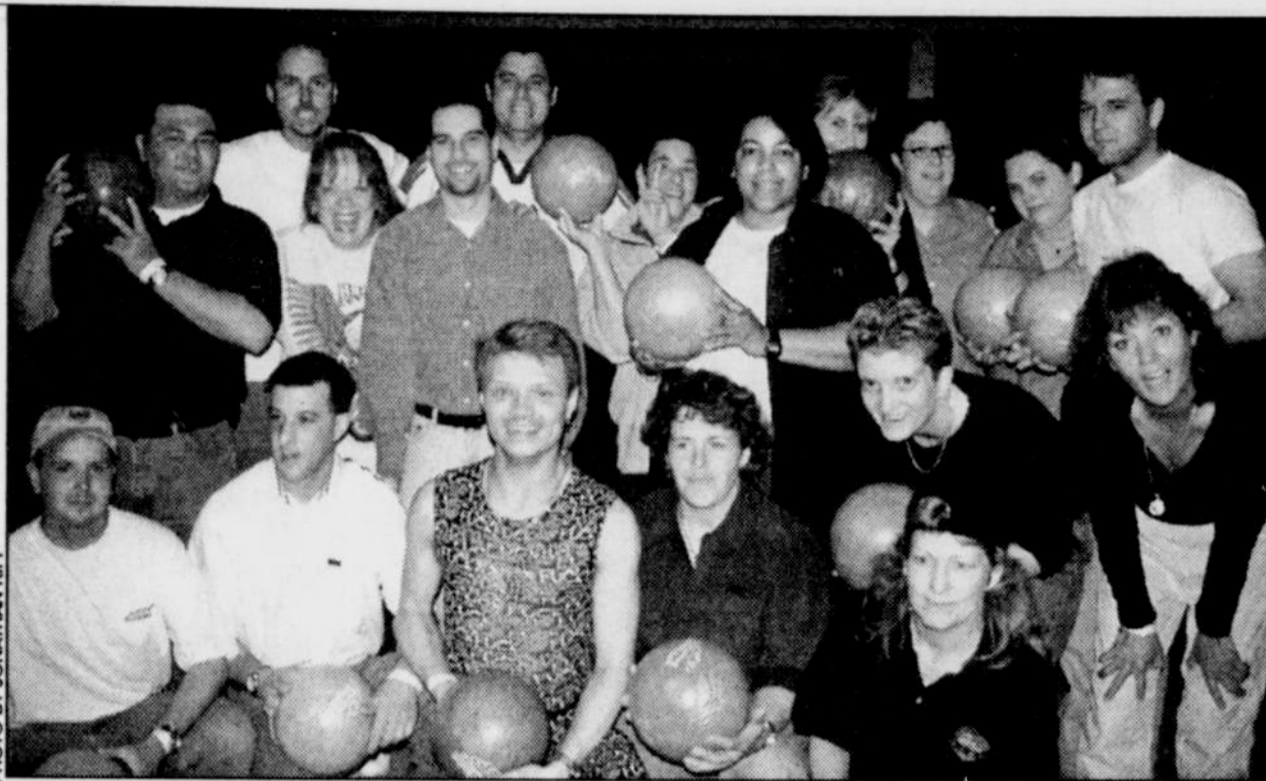


PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

since introduced him to the fun. They now attend events together.

One of the group's founders, Mike Audette, a Vancouver native, continues to organize the Socialites. In addition to planning events and ensuring they are successful, Audette has the daunting task of keeping the Socialites informed about upcoming events. After five years of work, Audette's mailing list has grown beyond 700 e-mail and home addresses. On top of that, Audette sometimes searches electronically for people to attend Socialites events.

Audette's creative recruitment effort paid off for the bowling event.

"I just got this random e-mail," said one female bowler, dressed in '50s bowling attire. She decided to attend with little knowledge of the group and brought along a date as well.

In 1995, an informal "gay town hall" was held to examine the interests, needs, services and problems of the gay and lesbian community residing in southwest Washington. One of the outcomes of the meeting, which was attended by more than 100 people, was the idea for a social organization. At that meeting, organizers stepped forward, the name was put to a vote and the Socialites was born.

Sociable souls

SW Washington Gay & Lesbian Socialites have a gay old time

BY JONATHAN KIPP

The group's annual budget is approximately \$2,000, raised during an annual summer cruise on the Portland Spirit. More than 400 people are expected to take part in this year's cruise, and participants will travel from all over the West to attend. The money raised at the event covers postage, advertising and other operating expenses for one year. In addition, some funds are put toward events, allowing the admission prices to be lower.

While the group mostly consists of singles, about 25 percent of those who attend are involved in significant relationships. The Socialites' events provide the opportunity to

meet other singles, but most events have an atmosphere of warm friendship rather than a pickup joint. Some people, however, have found more than just friendship. "It's possible that a love connection has been made," Audette concedes.

Socialites don't just socialize, members are involved in the community. Audette has recruited some of the Socialites for a new coed softball team from Vancouver. The Socialites also participate in Saturday in the Park, Vancouver's annual pride event.

Although Portland is a social destination for many who live across the Columbia River, some southwest Washingtonians prefer to stay in their own communities. For Mike Sager, Vancouver is not just where he lives with his partner, but where he socializes as well. Most of his friends live in the area and some participate in the group he co-founded. (One of the organizers of the original town hall meeting, Sager started the group with Audette.)

"A lot of my friends come to this to meet new people," Sager explains, adding that the group is always changing—"People cycle in and out."

Sager is also the head of a committee that organizes Saturday in the Park. The daylong event is scheduled for July 15. The Socialites will reach out to the community at the pride event by sponsoring a booth and talking to potential members, and the group has also had a hand in promoting Saturday in the Park.

"Vancouver works like that," Sager says of the cooperative atmosphere in his city. "Everything is so small it just works like that."

Vancouver Resources and Info

SW Washington Gay & Lesbian Socialites, P.O. Box 6002, Vancouver, WA 98668; socialites@aol.com; Mike Audette (360) 735-1901.

Webpride softball team is part of the Rose City Softball Association. Season runs through July. (360) 735-1901.

SW Washington Gay & Lesbian Resource Guide, www.gayvancouverwa.org; Carl Vanderzanden (360) 397-8215.

Men Talk of Vancouver meets on the first and third Monday of every month. Peter Christensen (360) 576-6595.

Imperial Sovereign Court of the Raintree Empire. Jane or Shelley (360) 699-5232.

Saturday in the Park 2000 "Generations of Pride" takes place from 1 to 8 p.m. July 15 at Vancouver Landing, Terminal 1, near Red Lion Inn at the Quay.

"We just like to read good books, eat good food and talk!" says Cary Renfro, an organizer of Marionberry Salon.

Marionberry Salon

The group, based in Salem, meets once a month. While the mailing list has nearly 20 names on it, about six to eight people attend each meeting of the book group. Renfro says certain folks come to every discussion, while others come if the book looks interesting to them. Most members are from Salem, but meetings are also attended by people who live in Dallas and Woodburn.

The mission of the group is to read books that touch on the gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans experience. While the group is open to all, regardless of sexual orientation, only sexual minorities currently attend.

Usually meeting on Saturday evenings for discussions over a potluck dinner, the group gathers in a different member's home each

month. Books are chosen two months in advance. It's more of a social group than anything else, according to Renfro, who adds that meetings are not highly structured.

The salon broke off from the Coalition to End Bigotry book group, which began meeting in 1993. The Salem Public Library was a co-sponsor until 1995, when it withdrew its sponsorship due to low attendance. The book group continued without the library's aid while the Coalition to End Bigotry became increasingly focused on Salem's annual pride celebration. The book group decided to separate from the coalition and continued meeting under the name Marionberry Salon. (The name is derived from the tasty native Oregon fruit.)

On May 20, the gathering will include a discussion of *The Kid* by Dan Savage. For more information, contact Renfro at (503) 363-6036 or MarionberrySalon@aol.com, or visit hometown.aol.com/marionberrySalon/myhomepage/index.html.

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