



SOUL FOOD

Sisters of the Road Cafe serves up some stew—and opportunities by Katy Davidson



Steel Fixler

Steel Fixler's office space is perched on a tall indoor balcony, surrounded closely by the cluttered desks of co-workers, and is only accessible by a steep, narrow spiral staircase. Amid the jumble of office supplies, a futon—called the "napatorium"—sits like a stuffed slug, and a large rainbow flag hangs from the ceiling.

Below the loft, more than 100 hungry visitors chat together and chomp on beef stew with cornbread, the special of the day.

Fixler says this scene is a typical afternoon at the Sisters of the Road Cafe, maybe a bit busier because of the nasty weather outside. Though May has arrived, it's still cold in Portland—today, at least—and dark clouds drop rain like hyperactive seagulls.

Today the dining area is a blur of people;

some are in line to get food, many are eating and talking with their neighbors. The kitchen is abuzz with clanking pots and a frantic plea to avoid stepping on a fallen piece of cheesecake.

Sisters of the Road, at 133 N.W. Sixth Ave., is one of Northwest Portland's hubs for the homeless, a place where lunch costs \$1.25 and opportunities are abundant. (If someone does not have money, he or she may use food stamps

or work in exchange for food.) The cafe is visited daily by people of all ages, races and sexual orientations—accordingly, the cafe's mantra is "all are welcome."

Fixler, a friendly, authoritative lesbian with a flattop, has been serving as the cafe's associate director for two and a half years. After working much of her adult life for the Girl Scouts of America, she moved to Portland and, after a stint with the Oregon Food Bank, stepped into her current position.

At Sisters of the Road, Fixler's official job is to supervise programs, write grant applications and coordinate other activities, but like every employee, she's cross-trained. Some days she'll fill in for the cashier, others she'll hang out front of the cafe, subconsciously beckoning to queers.

"Because I look so butch, it's like I'm a welcome mat," she says.

Because they are not welcome in schools or in their homes, 50 percent of all homeless youths are queer, Fixler says, adding, "That's a frightening and staggering statistic to me."

Sisters of the Road began operating 20 years ago under a philosophy of openness. In the beginning, it was supported primarily by lesbians, who inhabited Old Town at the time.

"If you were going to be out, this is where you could be out," Fixler says.

JUST UNITED

Not quite married, but close enough for a taste of equality: Small-town paper publicizes domestic partnership by Mary Ann Petersen

Something looked different on the back page of the Saturday, March 25, edition of the *The Ashland Daily Tidings*.

The *Tidings* is the newspaper that greets the 20,000 residents of Ashland, Ore., each afternoon. This small city, nestled at the base of the Siskiyou Mountains, is home to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Southern Oregon University. Both institutions contribute to the progressive current that runs through the city and its citizens.

Right there, amongst the public safety announcements, obituaries, movie listings and meeting notices, was a photo of two glowing men in bow ties.

They weren't selling anything. The text next to the picture explained that Michael Charles Clark and David Alan Ruks II were united in loving domestic union on Nov. 1, 1999, at the Ashland Municipal Court House.

"We both are kind of the marrying type. We want the picket fence and all that," Clark tells *Just Out*.

Michael Clark, 22, is a master's degree candidate in education and plans to be a music teacher. David Ruks, 23, is a criminology major working toward becoming a police officer. They have been together for four and a half years.

In October 1999, Ashland's City Council voted to establish a domestic partnership registry, the first program in Oregon to formally document same-sex relationships.

The purpose, according to the registration form, is to provide a "means by which unmarried, committed couples who share a life and

home together may document their relationship." Couples who could legally marry are not allowed to register.

For \$25 you and your partner, after presenting identification and filling out forms, are declared domestic partners. The city asks to be notified in the event that one partner dies or the couple breaks up.

After registering their partnership, Clark and Ruks sent a press release to the local papers along with the standard groom-and-groom information—all four parents' names and locations proudly appeared.

The *Medford Mail Tribune*, in a town about 15 miles away, responded with an e-mail telling

the two men that an editorial meeting would be called to decide what to do. The paper eventually declined to print the couple's announcement, mainly because their partnership is not recognized as a marriage.

Troy Heie, news editor of the *Ashland Tidings*, says: "We've never had a hard and fast policy on it."

In the five years Heie has worked at the *Tidings*, he doesn't recall any gay or lesbian wedding announcements coming across his desk. But, since he had space to run the men's information, he treated it like any other public service announcement, he says.

When asked if he thought the paper was making a statement by printing the item, Heie said he didn't think much about it at the time.

"I looked in our weddings file, saw the announcement, and scanned the photo," he explains.

Heie does admit to a moment's hesitation as he tried to think of a heading that would be appropriate. He decided against "wedding," rea-

soning that Clark and Ruks' joining technically was not a wedding.

"The best thing I could come up with on such short notice was 'union,'" he says.

Heie didn't consult with other staff about the paper's policy, he explains, emphasizing that Ashland maintains a liberal reputation.

"I just decided if these people are recognized by the city, then they have every right to be in the paper just like someone who is recognized by the church," he says.

When asked how the public reacted to the listing of the not-quite-marriage union, Heie responds: "It hasn't really been that big of a deal."

Heie says most of the responses were positive. A few subscribers canceled their subscriptions and listed the announcement as only one of several complaints, but no one canceled solely because of the featured union.

Since their announcement appeared, Clark and Ruks have been greeted with handshakes and congratulations—even from people in the community to whom they had not officially come out.

"The response has only been positive," says Clark.

At the middle school where Clark is a student teacher, some of the students saw the paper and asked if he really is gay. "I knew it!" most responded when told yes.

Both men have supportive parents. Clark's family lives in nearby Klamath Falls, Ruks' lives up north in Salem.

In expressing his appreciation for Ashland's progressive policy, Clark says: "This is a wonderful place to be gay. [Domestic partnership registration] is a wonderful first step. I'm really excited that Ashland is as forward thinking as it is, and it really makes me feel like I'm wanted and I have a place here, and that this is my home."

■ MARY ANN PETERSEN is a *Just Out* reporter living and writing in Eugene.

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Clark-Ruks

Michael Charles Clark and David Alan Ruks II were united in loving domestic union Nov. 1, 1999, at the Ashland Municipal Court House.

Mr. Clark is the son of Charles and Sandra Clark of Klamath Falls. He is a graduate student in education at Southern Oregon University.

Mr. Ruks is the son of David Alan Ruks and Wendell Ruks of Salem. He is a student at Rogue Community College.