

Cary Renfro and his partner of five years, Ken, live in Salem. It is where they want to live. And, like many of this community's citizens, Renfro tries to do his part to make his town a nicer place to live.

One of his volunteer positions is with the Salem Human Rights and Relations Advisory Commission. He's listened to the African American community voice concerns about life in Salem. He's listened to Native Americans and Latinos too. It's part of his job as a commissioner.

But when the commission recently hosted a focus group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans residents, Renfro came to the table wearing two hats—he was there not only to listen but also to be heard.

Salem's city code does not address discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodation against members of the sexual minorities community, Renfro says. He would like to see that change. And he is not the only one.

"Being a member of a protected class is the biggest, hottest and most important issue," Charese Rohnny, a commissioner and Salem attorney, says about the commission's recent priorities.

The commission approved a resolution last October, to be presented to Salem's City Council, requesting that sexual orientation be considered a protected class in the municipality's human rights code. The commission's next step is to lobby the City Council to support the proposal and to amend the city code.

But Rohnny says the commission wants to promote harmony between diverse groups as well—thus the commission's periodic focus groups for minority communities.

Renfro is currently working with some of Salem's supportive City Council members and with the mayor to finalize the wording of the new code. He wants to be certain the proposal reads as clearly as possible and is as inclusive as possible.

"We'll be ready to move forward very soon," Renfro says.

"What they'll do with it, I don't know," he adds, referring to the City Council.

The commission is still uncertain whether it can muster the votes needed to make the change.

Changing the city code is particularly important to Renfro. Discrimination based on sexual orientation in Salem isn't just theoretical to him.

Renfro was denied housing by an apartment landlord when he and his partner moved to Salem in the mid '90s. He's been verbally harassed on the streets of Salem and even shot



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN KIPP

ONE OF THE HEARD

Salem Human Rights and Relations Advisory Commission lends an ear to the sexual minorities community by Jonathan Kipp

at. Renfro's friend was fired because his boss learned he is gay. Two women he knows were kicked out of a dance club because they were on a date.

"We know that it exists," Renfro says.

Rather than move to a friendlier place with more protective laws, Renfro decided to get involved. He wanted change. His first step was to become a commissioner.

It wouldn't be until five years later that the commission would host an evening for public discussion of topics of interest and concern for his community.

The May 23 event attracted only three citizens who disclosed their sexual orientations—two men and one woman. A handful of others attended but said little.



Melly Holloway, chairwoman of Salem's Human Rights and Relations Advisory Commission; above: at the May 23 meeting

Despite the small turnout, plenty of discussion took place for the five commissioners present to hear about life in Salem for some of its residents. Much of what was said was infused with pain.

Concerns about youths, their safety in schools and the lack of resources for them were recurrent throughout the two-hour rap session.

"That's where my heart tends to go—to the youth," said a lesbian in her late 20s.

Some expressed anger that Salem-Keizer school district teachers and administrators still allow gay and lesbian students to be harassed and called names, while others wondered aloud whether the district even has a policy about such harassment.

One woman, a teacher, said the district does have a policy. The woman seated next to her, also a teacher, said staff do not know of such policies because they are not advertised.

Anthony Ivy, not long out of high school, often held the group's attention as he painfully recalled the harassment he endured in school and the abuse his friends have suffered on the streets of Salem because of their perceived sexual orientations.

"What's being done about discrimination?" he dramatically asked the group.

"In order to stop things, you have to educate," Ivy said. "Educate our children it is not OK to hate."

The passionate young man was angry that his school had an assembly to address issues related to incidents of gun violence at other schools, but when Matthew Shepard was killed he heard nothing about it.

Flo Olkoski and her husband, Ted, transplants from Florida since 1993, also attended the

focus group. They expressed concerns about some of the schools as well.

The couple is active in Salem's chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, as well as several human rights organizations. Although their lesbian daughter remains in Florida, the Olkoskis have gotten involved to change Salem's landscape of intermittent intolerance and bigotry toward sexual minorities.

The discrimination and oppression that sexual minorities face in Salem exceeds that of any other minority group with which the commission has met, says Melly Holloway, chairwoman of the commission.

Holloway admits that few complaints are filed with the commission, though she adds that lack of reporting doesn't mean there isn't a problem. Many people in the community don't know about the commission, she says, so that might explain why they do not come forward to report injustices.

The commission has no data available about how many complaints are made each year due to discrimination based on sexual orientation.

A few citizens complained about Salem police and the blatant homophobia exhibited by some officers. They called for sensitivity and diversity training of local law enforcement personnel.

But one man suggested police should not be taught about how the gay community is different.

"The police need to focus on similarities and basic human rights rather than the differences," Brandon Reich, a gay man, said.

Representatives from the Salem Police Department were conspicuously absent, one commissioner pointed out. The department, which is notified of every focus group, sent a representative to all three of the past meetings with other minority groups. Several commissioners expressed concern about law enforcement's absence.

The May 23 focus group was the fourth meeting the commission has sponsored this year to hear about the problems of minority communities.

The commissioners, all volunteers, hear complaints and have the power to conduct investigations and make referrals to the city attorney for possible prosecution. Most complaints are resolved, however, with the help of the commission, if the parties are amenable to mediation.

■ The HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELATIONS ADVISORY COMMISSION was created in 1964 by the Salem City Council to respond to concerns about the treatment of the area's minority residents. For more information about the commission, contact Maggie Tuttle at (503) 588-6261.

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