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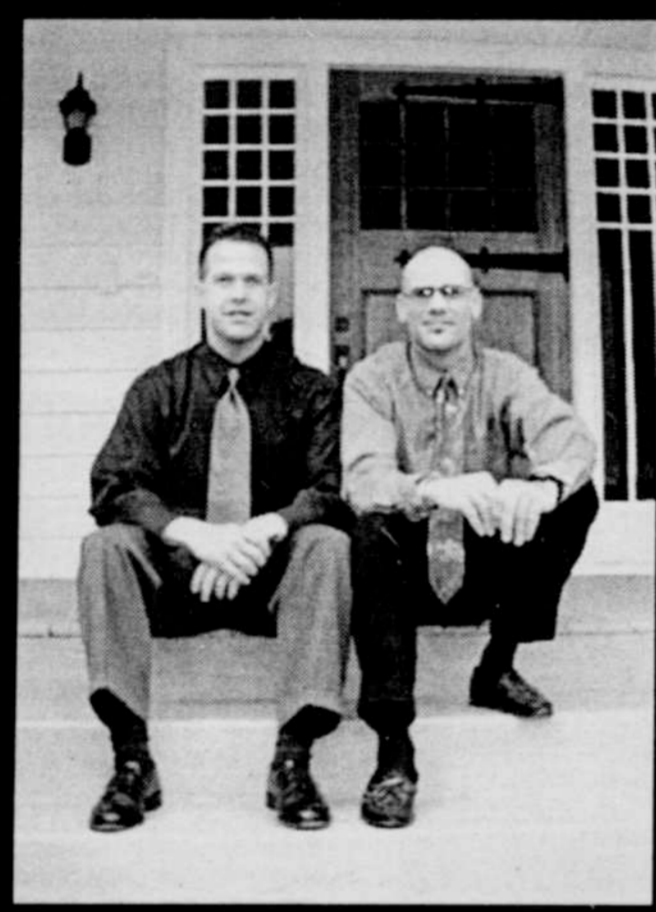
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NORTHWEST news

AVENGERS IN ACTION

The Lesbian Avengers plan Portland's annual Dyke March in classic grass-roots form—sans the aid of Pride Northwest by Katy Davidson



When sign-wielding Lesbian Avengers (left) staged a demonstration May 17, a Bible-quoting opponent (right) was conveniently on hand

It seemed like a typical day on the South Park Blocks near Portland State University. Underneath a canopy of green leaves, throngs of backpackers marched between classes, chatted, stopped for a smoke. One couple necked beside a large tree, one long-haired hooligan jammed some chords on a beat-up guitar. Another goofy-looking character, in high-tops and a sandwich board, preached the word of the Lord from atop a concrete riser.

Then came the divine interruption. "I can't believe there's a preacher here," blue-haired Erin Sexton said.

"I know—we're so lucky," Erin Savage replied excitedly. Behind the trunk of a wide tree, a small group of Lesbian Avengers painted the finishing touches on several signs bearing slogans such as: "Save yourself, be a dyke," "Bigots burn in hell," and "Tremble hetero swine."

After six more Avengers showed up, the group exploded onto the scene, toting their signs and shouting pro-dyke sentiments toward the preacher and a crowd of onlookers. They passed out flyers with information about the Oregon Citizens Alliance's proposed ballot initiative, commonly called the "Student Protection Act."

If approved by voters in the November general election, the act could ban support groups, gay-straight alliances, and AIDS education in Oregon's public schools.

Naturally, the PSU event morphed into an all-out shouting match between the Avengers and the preacher. At one point, when the preacher called the women insecure and gross, one Avenger yelled, "Insecurity? I'll show you insecurity!" then proceeded to make out with another Avenger in front of the crowd.

Though the outrageous scene garnered more giggles than outright support, the crowd seemed to side more with the Avengers than with the self-appointed messenger of God. One female student walked by and exclaimed, "I support the homosexuals!" After watching the melee for a while, another student said, "America's a great country. I feel so much better now."

These Lesbian Avengers are the same feisty women who put on Portland's annual Dyke March.

Traditionally, the Dyke March is held on the eve of the Portland pride parade. Though the Avengers make it clear their march is not affiliated with events organized by Pride Northwest, it's evident they hold the Dyke March on the night before because so many lesbians are already in town.

This year, the Dyke March falls on June 17,

and all marchers are instructed to meet in the North Park Blocks at 6:30 p.m.

The Portland chapter of the Lesbian Avengers was started in 1993 by Hillary Smith and 30 other women, and the group bombarded Southeast Hawthorne Street for the city's first Dyke March the following year. Though the Avengers have phased in and out of existence, 1,000 women showed up at last year's march.

The Avengers are proud to keep the march as grass-roots as possible by not using sponsors or city permits.

"The Dyke March is not a function of Pride Northwest," Sexton says. "It's not for commercial purposes, only for visibility."

According to Lisa Roth, a longtime lesbian activist from San Francisco, the nation's first "official" Dyke March crashed through Washington, D.C., in the early 1990s. It was a collaborative effort by several groups.

In 1993, three organizations in San Francisco—ACT UP Women's Caucus, Women Against Imperialism and Prairie Fire—joined forces and prepared to go to the March on Washington, "dreading that it would be male dominated, which it was, and male-oriented, which it was," according to Roth.

While in D.C., the groups decided to do something "very visible, very feminist, very fun, very in-your-face, and for women only." They planned a march with no permit and no cover-your-breasts policy, then discovered that the New York chapter of the Lesbian Avengers was planning to do a demonstration in front of the White House on the same day.

The San Francisco groups informed the Avengers about their plan, they agreed to join forces, and more than 20,000 women marched across the national mall together.

After the success in Washington, the groups flew back to San Francisco to march again on the night before the city's pride parade. Since then, the Dyke March has spread to New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and other major cities and is traditionally done on the eve of pride.

Though the Lesbian Avengers spearhead all of the Dyke March planning in Portland, it is more of a community-wide effort in other cities, such as San Francisco. Roth says the SF Avengers have always been quite a small group, but they have always worked on the Dyke March committee as individuals.

■ To get involved, or to get more information about the LESBIAN AVENGERS, call (503) 452-5408.

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