

OREGON OR BUST

They found their dream and decided to stay by Jonathan Kipp

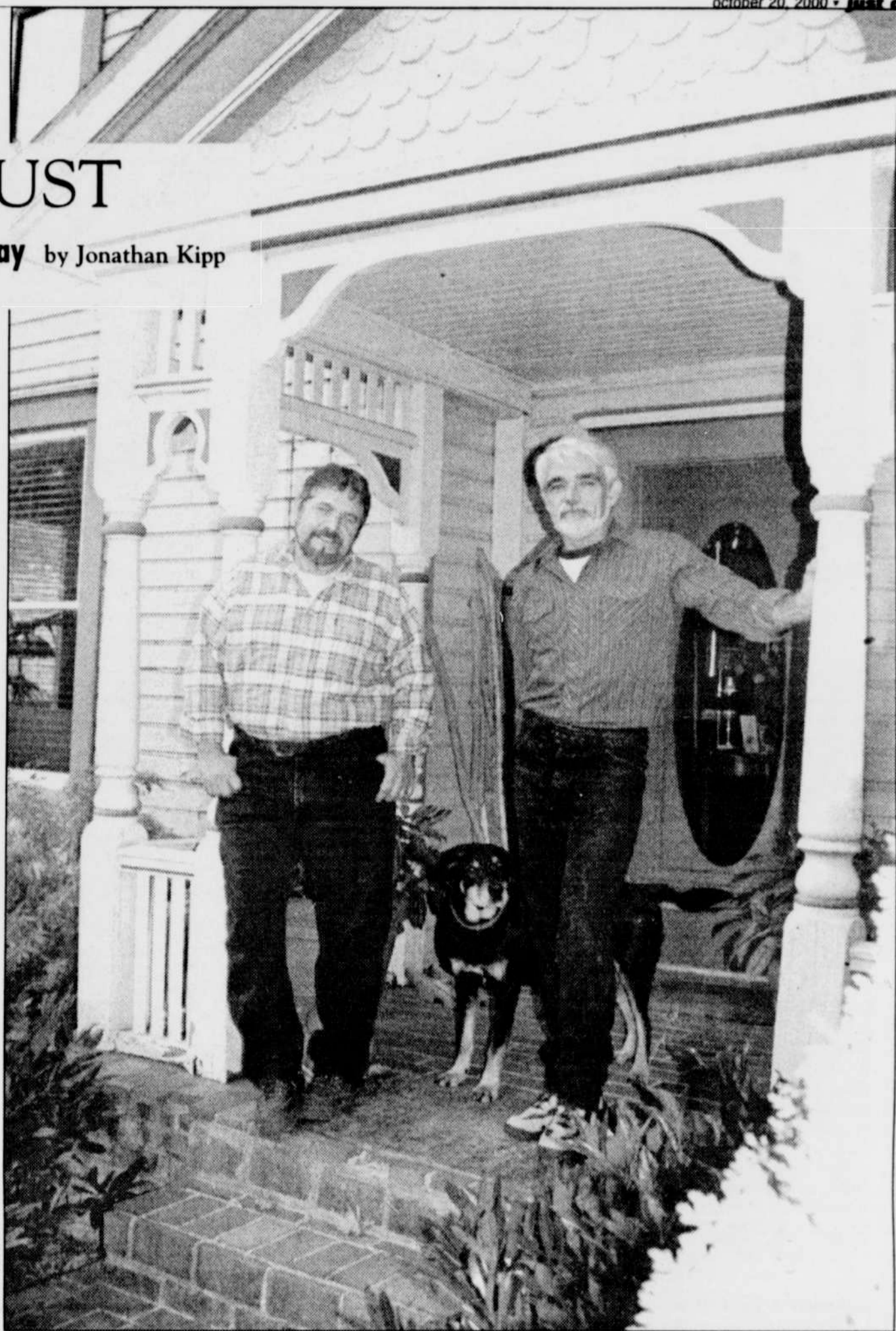


PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

John Tallerino and Marc Randall didn't let locals chase them off

In the late 1980s, San Francisco was in the midst of a nightmare.

Gay men were dying of AIDS at an alarming rate. In those days, it wasn't uncommon for some people to lose their entire circle of friends because of the new disease.

John Tallerino and Marc Randall were there. The couple had watched too many die.

And in the midst of doing so, they made a life-altering decision. Although they were both in the prime of their life, they couldn't escape the fact that life could be cut short—the lesson was forced on them almost every day.

If dreams were to be realized, the couple concluded, they'd better be a priority. They wanted a Victorian home on a big piece of land—with maybe a pond or a creek out back—within an hour's drive to Portland.

Everyone laughed at the idealistic plan. Many didn't think they ever would find their dream; it just sounded too good to be true.

But in 1989, the couple found their dream house and moved north. They sold their California home and their thriving corporate party business and decided to not look back.

Since then, life has been about rural living—in the heart of Oregon wine country—and renovating their 21-room Victorian home on 97 acres. A creek cuts through their large plot of land located about an hour southwest of Portland.

At first it was fun. The house needed a lot of work, and they loved seeing the transformation. Their dilapidated but stately home slowly was taking shape and returning to its original grandeur.

They planned a very private life, and they had one. Life was good.

But then came 1992's anti-gay Measure 9. "Suddenly, we were in the midst of it," Tallerino says.

The duo knew they had to get involved. No on 9 lawn signs went up, and Tallerino and Randall started speaking out.

They wrote a letter to their local newspaper. Suddenly, their anonymity in Sheridan was gone.

Then, vandalism started. Then came prank phone calls—some threatening and some merely harassing.

Cars passed, and epithets were screamed out. People even called them hateful names when they went into town to shop.

Little by little, the couple realized they

weren't spending time outside working on and enjoying the gardens surrounding their home. They had to admit to themselves they were scared.

They even quietly considered giving up their stately home—their dream. And then they got angry.

One night, a car drove up, and the passengers began hurling their usual put-downs. "Enough was enough," Tallerino says.

He got his shotgun, went out to the veranda and shot several times into the tall trees above the intruders' heads. "When you talk in their language, they start to understand better," he says.

The couple were living out their dream, and the locals weren't going to chase them off. "Our being here is an act of defiance," Randall says.

The men got busy. They visited their neighbors.

They put the renovation on hold and got political. They helped form the Rural Organizing Project and the West Valley Human Rights Coalition.

Measure 9 eventually was defeated, and Tallerino and Randall would like to think they had a little something to do with that. "We made a statement," Tallerino says.

"And, I think, we changed attitudes," Randall adds. They later helped battle 1994's Measure 13, a similar anti-gay initiative.

But for the latest go-round—the 2000 Measure 9—the men say they aren't getting involved. "We opted to sit this one out," Randall says.

The couple's yellow Labrador was run down and killed in front of their home during the Measure 13 campaign. The loss was devastating. "We've lost too much," Randall says.

This time, Randall and Tallerino are fighting the measure by just being what they call "an example." They talk to friends about the dangers of the initiative.

Most people, they say, haven't heard about Measure 9. Somehow, the publicity hasn't reached the area, they explain.

They live their life in rural Oregon and participate in their community. This helps alleviate people's fears about homosexuals, Randall says.

These days, most people who drive by the couple's spread slow down to honk and wave. Three years ago, they opened up their home to guests as the Middle Creek Run Bed and

Breakfast. Things have changed in wine country, they say.

The men now play host to visitors from all over the world. Most guests, they say, learn about the inn by word-of-mouth.

They say they are not afraid, although they admit they are cautious and aware of what is going on around them. They always try to travel together—even if going to the grocery store or taking a leisurely walk.

Sure, they miss having an opera house and a good theater nearby, and they wish they had

more restaurants to choose from. And despite their good friends and neighbors, they miss the diversity of people that city life offers.

But despite all of that, Randall says he would hate to leave his home and their patch of the Willamette Valley. "Some of our guests call this the best-kept secret in Oregon." **JK**

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