

# PFLAG DAY

Members from across the country come together for annual meeting

by Jonathan Kipp

About 100 people gathered at the Hotel Vintage Plaza to meet and greet celebrity mom Betty DeGeneres as part of the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays annual meeting Oct. 28. The Portland Gay Men's Chorus provided entertainment during the reception, a fund-raiser for the national organization.

DeGeneres, the mother of television star Ellen DeGeneres, signed copies of her second book, *Just a Mom*. She is a member of PFLAG and in 1997 became the first heterosexual person to serve as national spokeswoman for Coming Out Day.

DeGeneres told the crowd she also is the program's oldest spokeswoman. In addition to her speaking engagements, she writes a weekly advice column for PlanetOut.com.

"I call myself a late-blooming activist," DeGeneres told the crowd. "Because I'm Ellen's mom, I get this platform in which to speak. I feel like I'm speaking for all of you. It's a labor of love."

A Portland journalist once asked DeGeneres if she was using her daughter's celebrity. "Absolutely!" she recalled saying, to the group's delight.

Susan Carmel, co-founder of the first Gay Lesbian PTA in Seattle, also addressed the group. "I think you Oregon folks might be interested in something like this," she said.

Dr. Arnold Drake was elected as the new national president of PFLAG during the meeting. He and his wife became members of the organization a year after their son told them he was gay in 1986.

The Drakes later moved from Washington, D.C., to Memphis, Tenn., and started the



Betty DeGeneres signs copies of her second book, *Just a Mom*, during PFLAG's annual meeting Oct. 28 at the Hotel Vintage Plaza

state's first chapter. Tennessee now has seven PFLAG chapters.

Drake said he was a "Goldwater conservative Republican homophobe" when he learned he had a gay son. After a year of mourning, he eventually read the book *Parents of the Homosexual*, which served a turning point in his life.

Drake then attended his first PFLAG conference. "I thought I'd come home," he said.

"PFLAG really gives you the opportunity to change the world," explained Drake, who even has reached out to his conservative colleagues along the way. "They've been amazingly supportive, amazingly receptive."

Drake hopes his two-year term as president will result in even more gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered kids who feel safe in school and more people who can live openly without fear of violence and without fear of losing their jobs. "Then we will have been a part of that," he said.

"Parents have to go at their own speed," said Drake, whose son helped him realize that. "Most parents are at PFLAG because their children have sent them."

Only 10 percent of all parents of gay children have attended a PFLAG meeting, according to Drake. He said sending parents literature and keeping the lines of communication open will help them find their way to the supportive group and achieve a better understanding of their children's lives.

It is not uncommon for parents to take five years or more before accepting their child's sexual orientation. But the average PFLAG member transforms within two years from hearing what seems like crushing and shocking news to becoming what Drake considers activists.

The first step? Drake suggested children ask their parents the question, "Would you like me to send you some PFLAG information?"

For more information on PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS call 503-232-7676 or visit the Internet site [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org).

# GENEROUS DEGENERES

Hollywood's best-known mom finds her calling in life

Jonathan Kipp: What can parents do to help their gay kids?

Betty DeGeneres: If they're already in PFLAG, they're already making it easier. That's where all people should be—helping to educate and enlighten so their life will be easier.

JK: What was it like being thrust into the spotlight when Ellen came out?

BD: It seemed like the right thing to do. It wasn't scary. It seems like it was my calling in life.

JK: How was writing your two books?

BD: It was wonderful. I kept a journal for years. So much was that. And letters between Ellen and me—a lot of it was just there.

JK: If being in the media spotlight wasn't a challenge to you, coming out yourself as a mother of a lesbian daughter wasn't a challenge

and writing two books wasn't a challenge, what has been a challenge for Betty DeGeneres?

BD: Writing fiction is a challenge. And my column on PlanetOut is a challenge.

JK: Ellen and Anne Heche were here last summer right up the street. Was everything fine then, or did everything just look fine during their visit to Portland? Were there clues of what was coming?

BD: No clues. Out of the blue. It was a hard time.

JK: Have you talked to Anne since then?

BD: Briefly, but not lately. Ellen and I have always been supportive of each other. That's what we are doing now.

JK: What's Ellen up to anyway?

BD: Another TV show. They're still formu-

lating the concept. Ellen says it will be out by the time she's 60.

JK: Is there a negative side of being famous for Ellen?

BD: Oh sure. Always in the spotlight, very little privacy, gossip.

JK: Is your daughter thick-skinned, or do the media and the gossip get to her?

BD: No, she does not have a thick skin, so that is hard.

JK: What about you? Do you get recognized across the country?

BD: Sometimes, not very often.

JK: Really?

BD: I'm just an everyday mom. jn

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