

CANDID CAMERA

Michael Whipple looks through a lens and sees a new life

by Jonathan Kipp

When Michael Whipple was a teen-ager, he wanted to become a pastor.

He loved God and saw himself devoting his life to religion. But when he took a risk and came out to his church as a gay man, he was held down and exorcised.

That incident left him disillusioned and angry. He was mad at God and would remain so for years.

Whipple hid out. He drank heavily and was depressed.

Then, his health began to fail; his viral load was up, and his T cell count was down. More than once, he thought his life might be near the end.

But even more disappointing, Whipple explains, is that he hadn't lived up to his own expectations. He had big dreams when he was younger.

He thought about becoming a pilot or a politician; later, he quietly dreamed of working in television or film. None of these dreams were to be.

But one day, Whipple cleaned up. And in the clarity of his newfound sobriety, he took note of an advertisement he saw on television: A cable station was looking for volunteers.

He made the call and soon started attending training classes. At that point, he was excited to be involved in video production; he had no idea his new undertaking would transform his life.

But it did. Whipple began looking at the

world quite differently.

He knew his life could be short, and he quickly concluded that he wanted to give something back to his community in the time he had left. He knew he had loose ends that needed to be tied up.

Little by little, Whipple became more involved at Tualatin Valley Community Access, a Portland cable station, taking classes and eventually becoming a producer volunteer. Looking through the lens of his video camera put him on a path he didn't expect, one that would lead back to the place where the dreamer's life originally took a bad turn: the church.

He got involved in First United Methodist Church, a reconciling congregation near downtown Portland. It is open and affirming to all people regardless of gender, class, sexual orientation and ethnic background.

Whipple started writing, producing and editing video projects for the church. Last March, he and 40 volunteers went on a mission to Oklahoma to rebuild homes destroyed by an F-5 tornado. He interviewed survivors and agencies involved in the project and toured the path of damage that stretched 40 miles long and one mile wide.

The program, which aired in Portland and across the country, soon will be shown in Europe. Whipple received commendations for his work including a plaque from Oklahoma's governor.

Working alongside a reconciling congregation, he said, somehow resulted in his own



Michael Whipple

reconciling with God and his own spirituality. And he began making peace with his homosexuality and set out to make things right with the gay community—a community he always had wanted to reach out to but never could.

Part of that reconciliation included pro-

ducing a four-part video series, *Spiritual Discoveries*, dealing with the spiritual lives of gays and lesbians. Most recently, *No on Measure 9: An Interfaith Service for Equality*, was shot and edited. More than 600 people attended the service, during which clergy and laypeople shared their concerns and fears about the Oregon Citizens Alliance initiative.

Whipple, 43, still has big dreams, but today they are of a different variety. He hopes for the day when he and his partner of six years can have a marriage the church will reconfirm.

He dreams of more and more churches signing on as reconciling congregations. And he hopes his videos will help educate people so younger gays and lesbians will have an easier time.

"I want my life to give something to them," Whipple said. "I really hope I am doing that." **JK**

NO ON MEASURE 9: AN INTERFAITH SERVICE FOR EQUALITY airs 5 p.m. Nov. 3 and 10 a.m. Nov. 6 on cable Channels 6 and 21.

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