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NORTHWEST news

THE END?

Report clears Pride Northwest of wrongdoing by Jonathan Kipp



The dispute, simmering since last summer's Pride 2000, finally might be over

A letter from the Oregon Department of Justice recently sent to Pride Northwest might be the final chapter in a months-long dispute between the nonprofit and two former board members. The state agency conducted an inquiry into the organization after receiving a detailed complaint. Ironically, the letter from Assistant Attorney General Judith Woodruff has pleased both Pride Northwest and the complainants.

The dispute began last summer when Tamera Swan and Janna MacAuslan, longtime participants in the organization that produces Portland's annual summer pride event, found themselves off the board of directors. The women claimed they were removed illegally because of petty personality conflicts; Pride Northwest maintained they both failed to receive the needed votes.

MacAuslan and Swan also were outspoken about a litany of organizational issues. They claimed that the board did not follow its own insufficient bylaws and that the organization was leaving itself open to embezzlement because of sloppy handling of finances.

In the weeks that followed Pride 2000, tempers flared and communication between the two parties slowed as both sides polarized. Each had significant community support.

To some, it looked like a never-ending chess game. Others compared the dispute to a junior high student council.

Some called it normal—something most growing nonprofit organizations experience. When the Department of Justice was called in to intervene, both sides awaited vindication.

MacAuslan said the agency's conclusions basically reflected what she and Swan were saying all along. She said the report pointed out what needed to be changed and cleaned up within the organization.

The attorney general's office is responsible for the supervision of charitable organizations holding assets in the state. It is authorized to investigate whether the purposes of the charitable corporation are being advanced and whether any person has violated a fiduciary duty arising under common law. The suggestions made in the report are not legally binding.

Pride board chair Carmella Ettinger also was pleased with the letter. She was encouraged that an unbiased party looked into the situation and concluded that the volunteers were doing good work and doing what is supposed to be done. "I was really happy," Ettinger said after reading the letter.

The inquiry did not find any wrongdoing. Although an official audit was not conducted, Pride Northwest's finances were reviewed.

No indication of embezzlement or misappropriation of organization assets was found.

Woodruff strongly suggested, however, that the group do a financial audit on a regular basis.

The assistant attorney general reviewed a multitude of the organization's documents and conducted interviews with the complainants and board members. "All appeared to be sincerely interested in the mission of Pride Northwest," according to the report.

But the letter said the inquiry did uncover some indication that improvement in certain areas would make the organization's internal controls more effective. The investigator found a lack of proper minutes, inadequate minute records and inadequate budget reports.

The organization's bylaws also could use some work, the report said. New policies and practices are needed, particularly around elections.

Ettinger said most of the problems have been on Pride Northwest's radar and are being worked on. She said that the suggestions are all good and that the board will be moving forward with implementing the changes.

MacAuslan said she still would like to work with Pride Northwest in the future but will move on for now. "We've done all we can do," she said.

MacAuslan said she hopes the state's recommendations will be implemented. "I think if would be for the betterment of Pride that they make some of the changes."

But what pleased MacAuslan most about the report was that it emphasized the community. "The board members are the custodians not only of the organization's assets but also for the accumulated efforts of those who preceded them in founding and expanding the organization they now serve," the report said.

Ettinger said the report should bring resolution to the issue—one that has tormented both sides for months. "I really hope it does," she said.

Pride Northwest recently selected "Bridges of Pride" as the theme for Pride 2001.

A special contest was held encouraging suggestions. The winner was Warren Becker.

The event will be June 16 and 17. The keynote speakers and the parade's grand marshal will be announced this month.

The board of directors is accepting nominations for the Spirit of Pride Award. Nominations will be accepted through Feb. 14.

The public is welcome to address the board on the second Wednesday of each month. The next meeting will start 6:30 p.m. Dec. 13 on the third floor of Portland State University's Smith Center. □

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