

In a rainy city like Portland, it seems doubly fitting that a gay man would open a store called Rainbows.

A former fitness instructor, owner Rex Rainbows (yes, he says that's his real name) began contemplating his business venture five years ago. His primary motivation wasn't to make money but rather to fill a gap in the local marketplace that would offer a positive reflection of the sexual minorities community in his hometown. "I went Christmas shopping and realized how much money I was spending in stores that didn't support equal rights of gay people but yet didn't hesitate to take my money," he says.

Rex strongly believes businesses dealing with the sexual minorities community—whether gay-owned or simply gay-oriented—need to "walk the walk" by honoring diversity rather than just trying to make a profit. Queer consumers also need to be sensitive about where they spend their dollars and the power their choices can wield.

Rex's philosophy, however, is to bring solutions—not complaints—to the table. Rainbows, he decided, was going to be his solution to a lack of community pride products available to gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people of Portland.

Before settling into his downtown location, Rex checked out other hot spots throughout the city, including the popular Northwest, Hawthorne and Broadway districts. In the end, however, he didn't want to ride the coattails of trendy shops nor be confined—or perhaps more likely defined—by a particular neighborhood. His corner shop conveniently is situated near the Stark Street corridor of other gay and lesbian establishments, but more importantly, the location instinctively felt right to this budding entrepreneur.

And gut instinct is about all he had to rely on.

RAINBOW CONNECTION

Downtown merchant sees store as bridge between communities

by Timothy Krause

Without any experience and with little practical knowledge about retail operations, Rex jumped into the fray, buoyed by his strong will and defiant determination to succeed.

Rainbows opened for business in October 1996 and, yes, almost all of his merchandise has the rainbow theme. From flags to candles, greeting cards to umbrellas, Rex's store offers nonpolitical, nonsexual merchandise that promotes a sense of pride among sexual minorities in Portland.

"I treat the store in the view of the long run," he says, "continually upscaling the product but maintaining the variety."

Rex has created what he calls "a great bridge" between the queer community and the straight world. It's a place, he says, where one can feel good about bringing family and where people from all walks of life are honored with respect and dignity—a place, he jokes, where the biggest cock is a large glass chicken in the window display.

"I like being really positive and helping people to feel their own self-worth," Rex says. "It's all about diversity."



Michael Armstrong II and Jasmine Dotson are among Rex Rainbows' colorful staff members

And that diversity is reflected in his clientele, which he says is equal parts gay and straight. Despite the store's prime downtown location, Rex says as many as three-quarters of his customers travel from outside Portland to browse through the unique stock.

The eclectic items he offers are equally varied, whether emphatically queer or suggestively multicolored. Although he would propose that his canine companion, Harmony, is the most popular feature of the store, Rex says pride materials (such as stickers, T-shirts and the like) ring up the most sales. Trendy at the moment,

though, are lamps, mirrors or anything glass.

Many items—and the place is filled from ceiling to floor—are made by local artists or distributed by area companies, further promoting a sense of community. For example, floor mats are made by the Sherwood Activity Center, coffee cups come from the Mug Rack, and ornamental items are crafted by Jan and Jan of Todd's Corner, to name a few.

The mixture of fun and fancy, Rex says, allows him to carry something for everyone, ranging from a \$2 toy to an \$800 work of art.

With his staff of four, he also is handling the merchandising for Pride 2001 in June. Rainbows is arranging, among other things, mugs and T-shirts bearing the colorful new "Bridges of Pride" logo, from which a percentage of sales will be donated to Pride Northwest.

Pride weekend is only one of many events in which Rainbows participates. Rex says most of his advertising budget is consumed by donations to fund-raisers and other

community-oriented projects.

He sees this not only as a way to give to the community but as his best advertising medium. Ultimately, it's Rex's way to "walk the walk" down the two-way street of community pride and support. ■

Located at 1136 S.W. Alder St., RAINBOWS may be reached by calling 503-525-9630 or sending e-mail to rrainbows@aol.com.

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