

MEET THE PRESS

Small newspaper has been making headlines for almost 25 years
by Pat Young

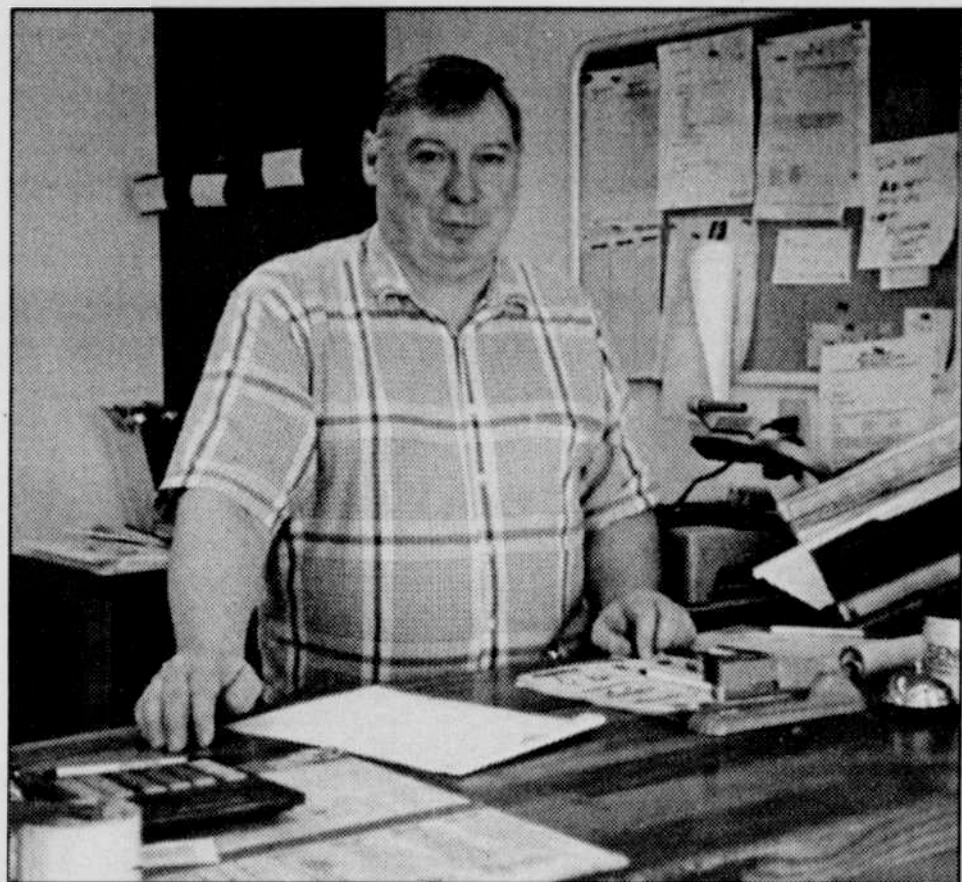


PHOTO BY PAT YOUNG

What started out as a social group has evolved into a strong business, *Community News* publisher Chuck Simpson says

The *Community News* might not be a glossy, colorful publication, but it's packed with rainbow scoops. The Salem-based paper has been around in various formats and names since 1977.

Publisher Chuck Simpson says it couldn't have come at a better time. "There wasn't much of a sense of community in Salem until a bar opened in 1976."

However, not everyone was into the bar scene. "A lot of older people—well, those in their late 30s," Simpson adds with a laugh, "started having volleyball games and doing things outside of the bar."

Some of them knew each other from the Woodburn area, where they once had a group. One night, they had a potluck at Simpson's apartment. About 15 people showed up for good food, stimulating conversation and a desire to form a group in Salem, where they could lobby for gay rights and have social gatherings. That night, they launched the Capital Forum and its accompanying newsletter.

It might have seemed easy to start the organization, but this was 1977. It was a time when singer Anita Bryant, best known for her orange juice commercials, successfully led the fight to defeat a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Fla. Similar efforts were defeated in Minnesota and Kansas.

Despite some setbacks on the national scene, several gay groups already had formed throughout Oregon: the Portland Town Council and Second Foundation in Portland, the Gay People's Alliance in Eugene and the Klamath Gay Union in Klamath Falls. Session after session, they lobbied the Oregon Legislature for gay rights. The bills didn't pass, but the activists didn't give up.

In 1977, the Eugene City Council amended the city's human rights ordinance to prohibit discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing and public accommodations. But it had a short life once Bryant's message spread across the nation. Eugene voters repealed the ordinance the next year.

Against this backdrop, members of the Capital Forum built their organization to serve the needs of Marion, Polk and Linn counties. "In a matter of days we had over 400 members; 25 of them were straight," Simpson remembers.

As the organization grew, so did the newsletter. At first it covered local and group events. When it began including news from a wider area, the publication shifted from a newsletter to a newspaper.

Patricia Jackson remembers the early days before they had computers when she and Mary Albert gathered at the president's apartment to lay out the paper. They'd spread out the articles on the floor and move them around until they fit. Not exactly high-tech, but lots of fun, and it worked.

Besides helping with editing, layout and getting the publication to the printer, Jackson and Albert also were involved in distribution. "Taking the papers to Portland was a trip of experience," she explains. "We distributed to 23 bars and bathhouses. Mary drove. I delivered. It took two hours in Portland alone, besides driving there, most often at night. I went to places I would never go to intentionally."

During the dawn of the Reagan era, the *Capital Forum News* decided that although the organization was "not basically political, we have been working strongly towards gay rights and will move even more in that direction during the 1980s."

"The Capital Forum split over that," Simpson notes. "Some of the newspaper people and the political people left and formed Lambda Horizons because others wanted the Capital Forum to be a social organization."

The split lasted just a few years. According to Simpson, everyone eventually became more political, so the groups merged along with their respective newsletters. "We called the new publication *Community News* because we were community again," he says.

The newspaper has been going strong ever since, with just a few bumps in the road. Simpson remembers a time about 15 years ago when the *Community News* almost had to fold because all of its expenses came up at once, plus the printing cost increased.

He and a few others headed to Portland to get more advertisers. "We ran into John Adams Sr. of C.C. Slaughters, and he said, 'Why don't you have another fund-raiser?'"

Adams donated items and called around for more support. "We came back with a carload and had to go back the next day to get the rest," says Simpson, who still is grateful for the support from C.C. Slaughters, Darcelle XV, Embers Avenue, Scandals and Old Wives' Tales.

Volunteers continue to put the paper together, but technology has changed the operation. "We don't need as many now," Simpson explains. "We never see the writers, because they send in their stories through e-mail. It seems like it is more of a business now instead of a social group."

According to Simpson, the distribution list reaches well into the thousands, and the paper goes out to people in Corvallis, Eugene and Albany and up and down the Oregon coast. □

PAT YOUNG, a Portland-based free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian, is writing a book about 1992's *Ballot Measure 9*.



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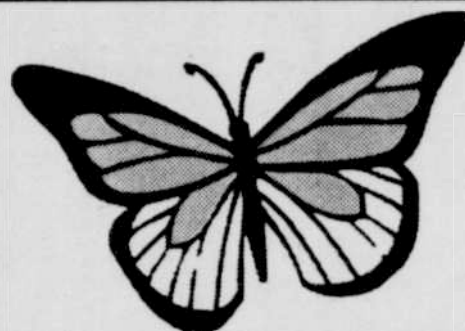
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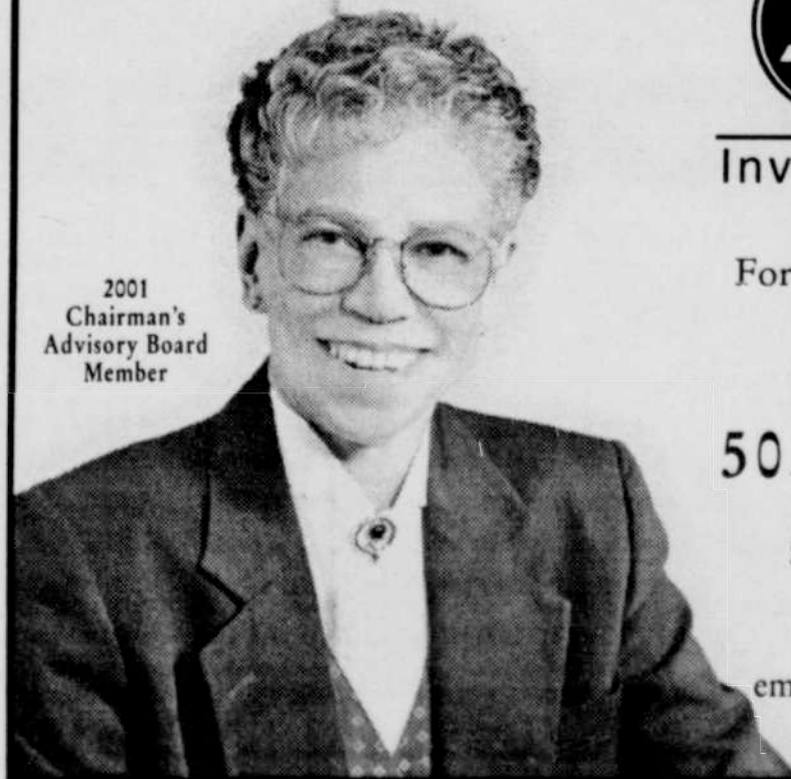
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