

A native Minnesotan, she missed experiencing the annual rhythm of four seasons while living in California. She says the white Christmas season reminds her of her childhood. Although Bend gets an average of just 12 inches of rainfall annually, more than 33 inches of snow falls each winter.

Being a lesbian in central Oregon hasn't ever posed a problem for Witte. She thinks that is because people get to know her and genuinely like her. "Just because I'm real people." She says it is her style to be honest about who she is but admits she doesn't feel the need to walk down the streets of Bend holding her girlfriend's hand.

For Witte, there are no negative aspects to living in Bend. When pressed, she admits the area has limited cultural events and lacks a Nordstrom.

"But I don't need Nordstrom. I'd rather go to Home Depot," she says with an ear-to-ear grin.

Most people make trips to Portland to get the things they miss in Bend. But not Witte. She hasn't been to the Willamette Valley in five years. "There's everything I need here."

Witte shares her life with Jan, her partner of 20 years. Although the couple have raised horses, sheep and goats on more than one of the area's small ranches, they recently decided to simplify their life.

Today, the women live with their cats and dogs on five acres. "I traded my horses for a fly rod," Witte says.

*Interested in Bend real estate? Contact Gail Witte of Duke Warner Realty at 541-382-8262 or [www.dukewarner.com/gail](http://www.dukewarner.com/gail). If you're an angler, ask about her waterproof Fly-Fishing Log, available in more than 30 stores throughout the Pacific Northwest.*

## A new life

In 1991, 36-year-old Dan O'Neil and his partner, Ed, were both HIV-positive. O'Neil had lost about 75 friends to AIDS by that time.

He figured he and Ed eventually would die, and neither wanted to experience their final days in rainy Portland. We just as easily could die in the sunshine, they thought.

O'Neil says he needed a change of scenery and a smaller town to call home—and some light. "I just wanted the sun."

During a ski trip to Mount Bachelor, he got above the cloud layer and had a life-changing thought: "This might be a fun place to live." So the couple found lesbian real estate agent Gail Witte and purchased a home in Bend.

They didn't have jobs, they didn't know one person, and they didn't know what life in central Oregon would be like. Still, they moved.

The men eventually found work—O'Neil as a part-time graphic designer at an ad agency and Ed at the county assessor's office—and settled into their new life. They got involved with their local parish (O'Neil is a former priest) and developed a small circle of friends. Life was good.

Then Ed died in 1996. Despite the magic of life in Bend, O'Neil realized he had no true connection with gay men in the area and wondered if he should continue living there.

Before moving on, he decided he should try to meet some people and give single life in Bend



PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

a chance. His experience of being alone during that time later would be the catalyst for him to take action to help remedy one of the area's flaws: the isolation of gay men.

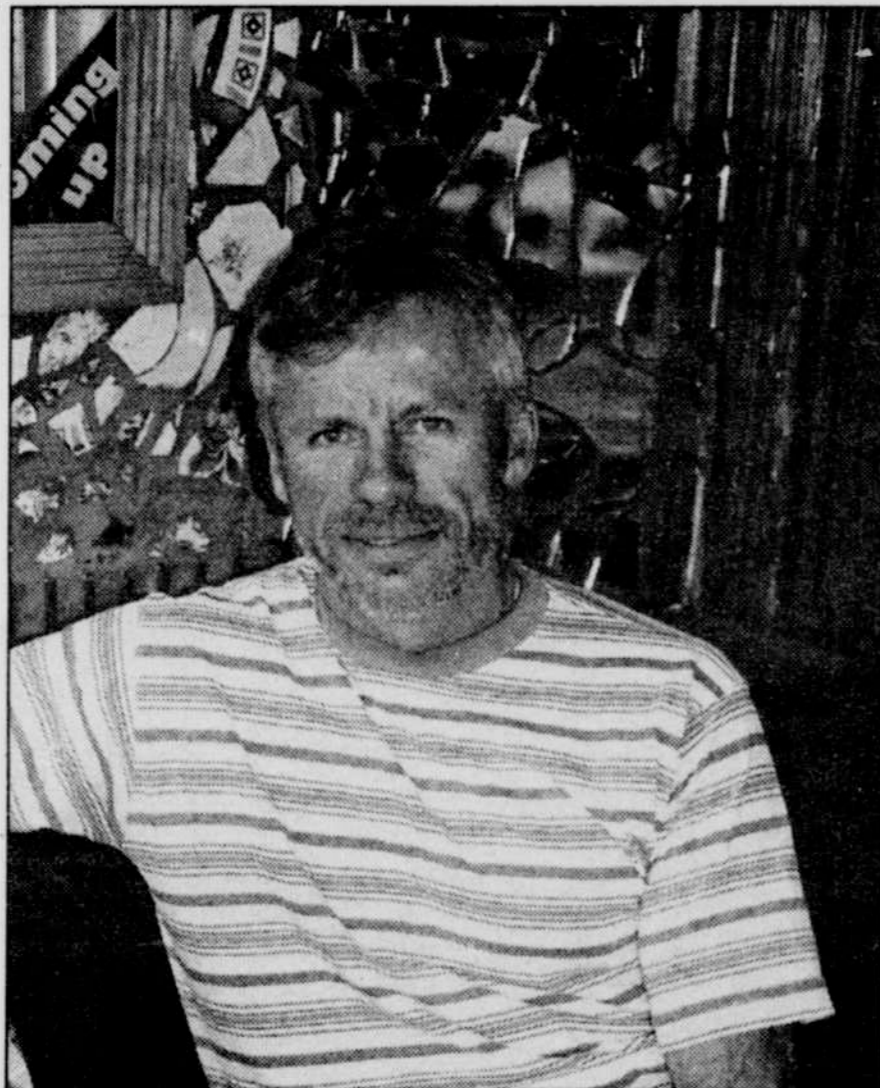


PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

Dan O'Neil is taking action to help remedy one of the area's flaws: the isolation of gay men

When O'Neil met Steve, who lived north of Bend along Highway 97 in Madras, he just was looking for someone to go bicycling with. After the men developed a friendship, a romance blossomed.



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

In 1998, they bought a home together in one of Bend's upscale westside neighborhoods overlooking the city.

Today, the couple are leaders in the area's gay male community. They play host to a safe-sex telephone hot line in their home sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Calls come in from gay and bisexual men living in Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties.

But the couple go beyond just answering phones. They have people over for dinner who are dealing with coming out, put on fundraising events for the community and coordinate a monthly dinner for gay men. They even invite a diverse group over for a television night to watch *Queer as Folk*.

There are no real strangers in this couple's life. They want to reach out to anybody in need of a hand.

O'Neil says he didn't move to the area to become a hermit. He knows how isolated people can become.

He saw for himself how damaging it can be to not have the support of gay male peers. He says the Internet, so popular among rural gay men, is no replacement for a real community.

Now, O'Neil has a part-time job as a case-worker for Deschutes County's HIV program in addition to his ad agency gig. He works with two nurses in looking after patients.

Although about 60 county residents have HIV, he estimates only half of them are receiving services. Most are white gay men.

While he has sat on statewide advisory com-

mittees and is well-versed on AIDS issues, O'Neil also is in the trenches dealing with HIV-infected people who are homeless, disenfranchised and thrown away by their family and friends. The stories he tells about his clients are unexpected for such a rich resort town.

One client lives in a shed behind his parents' home. Others would be lucky to have such permanent accommodations.

Many can't begin to afford Bend's skyrocketing rents, O'Neil says, and are living in cheap motels. The county's HIV clients are not unlike others across the state and the country: lacking financial, health care, social and personal support resources.

"Everyone in Oregon thinks everything that's happening is in the I-5 corridor," he says. "There is a whole other world east of the Cascades and a lot of things going on."

But O'Neil doesn't dwell on struggles more than he needs to. Today, he's a survivor.

He is committed to stress-free living and enjoying his new life. He's got a lot to live for: a man who loves him, two jobs he is passionate about and an important position in his community helping others.

Standing on his expansive deck overlooking Bend and beyond, O'Neil is lean, strong and

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tan—a picture of health. He stares out at the view and sips a glass of red wine as Steve tends to chops on the barbecue and tosses a fresh green salad.

While the central Oregon sunlight fades, the lights of Bend start to dot the landscape. "Why wouldn't you want to live here?" he asks.

To contact Dan O'Neil call 888-429-6368 or send e-mail to [oneil@bendcable.com](mailto:oneil@bendcable.com).

## Go fish

When Cecilia Lee would head back to Portland after camping in central Oregon with friends, she always felt sad. "We'd cry going all the way back over the mountain," she reminisces.

She wanted a change in her life and eventually decided to make a big one. Her first step was purchasing two acres just 15 minutes south of Bend.

That afforded her weekends away from Portland, where Lee held a job at Intel for 17 years. Her next step was moving to central Oregon.

She kept her job, commuting back and forth across the Cascade Range. That plan wasn't a real solution, though.

"I need to fish or cut bait," Lee says. Eventually, she decided the time had come for a complete change of scenery and a new life.

So in 1994 she quit her job and moved to central Oregon for good. Her friends thought she was crazy. They wondered how she just could pick up and move with no job and without knowing a soul.

Lee didn't wait long to get acquainted with

Continued on Page 28