



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

## Too pretty to go to hell

The Lesbian Avengers get ready for the Dyke March

BY JESSICA CITTI

Most of the women who join are in their late teens to mid-30s, and the group welcomes bisexual and transsexual women. "Join us," Barnard says, noting that the meetings and work parties are casual and direct action based. No "Dear Mr. Congressman" envelope licking here;

large papier-mâché cunt as well as homemade signs. Cunt-shaped objects seem to be a theme among the Avengers—they were able to fund the march partly through selling lollipops in the shape of every lesbian's favorite sex organ.

The beer has arrived, and everyone is out on the deck, opening paint and tearing up cardboard. One woman writes a letter to the Oregon Citizens Alliance on her sign: "Dear OCA, We fuckin' won! Love, the Avengers."

The cat has to have paint washed from its paws. The signs keep piling up, yelling out in bold strokes phrases like DYKE POWER and TOO PRETTY TO BURN IN HELL.

If social change begins on the local level, then it is here, on this deck on an overcast Sunday in May. It is in these women, here to paint on cardboard, talk and laugh. In a way these signs all say BEWARE—these dykes have learned to eat fire and are getting ready to spit it back. [M]

The DYKE MARCH gathers 6 p.m. June 16 at the North Park Blocks and winds its way toward Waterfront Park. Come make signs and safe-sex kits at noon June 3; make safe-sex kits and be trained to marshal the march June 10. Call 503-452-5408 for locations.

JESSICA CITTI is a Portland free-lance writer.

It's an overcast Sunday afternoon. Five women stand out on a deck in a Portland neighborhood, lighter fluid and Zippos at their feet. A cat looks on warily.

One of the women, Dawn, holds a burning stick out in front of her, tilts her blond head back and puts the fire in her mouth. "Just close your lips—it's easy once you try it," she tells Annie Otis, a new recruit.

Otis hadn't known they would be eating fire, but she agrees to try if only to "add it to my repertoire." She takes the flaming stick and lifts it toward her face.

"Oh my God," she laughs, "this is real fire!" But she still does it, extinguishing the flame in her mouth to the congratulations of others around her.

Eating fire seems to be an initiation ceremony for the Lesbian Avengers. Come to one of their Sunday meetings and be prepared for Dawn to coax you outdoors to put a ball of fire into your mouth.

There is history behind this act, the Avengers will remind you. During the first No on 9 Campaign in 1992, a homophobe threw a firebomb into the home of a lesbian and a gay man. The fire-eating is an act of remembrance and an act of defiance.

"The fire will not consume us," the Avengers chant when fire-eating in public. "We take it and make it our own."

You can decline this fire-eating lesson, if you wish. There are plenty of other things to do. This particular meeting is a work party to prepare signs for the annual Dyke March.

A core group of six women make up the Portland Lesbian Avengers, although many more show up at events. They are excited about this year's march and encourage aspiring Avengers to join them in the planning process.

Otis is on the Lesbian Community Project board of directors. She says she had known about the Dyke March in the past but never had a chance to get involved until now. She

likes how the Avengers focus on lesbians, as opposed to the all-inclusive Pride.

Well-known writer Sarah Schulman founded the first Lesbian Avengers chapter in New

York City in 1992. She and other politically active lesbians wanted to form an in-your-face direct action group that would ensure the survival and visibility of lesbian, bisexual and trans dykes around the world. The Avengers now have as many as 55 chapters, at least five of which are outside the United States.



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Sarah Barnard has been an Avenger for four years, participating in the Dyke March for five years. She says she heard about the group in college and joined after moving to Portland. She thrives on the "screaming nonconformist dyke voice" of the Avengers, noting a need for loud lesbian collectivism and presence.

Barnard thinks the women's flagrancy sometimes causes others to push them away unfairly; she says the No on 9 Campaign asked them not to participate in certain events. "They basically wanted everyone to shut up," she says, which is exactly what the Avengers refuse to do.

just loud, public events.

Dawn, the fire-eater extraordinaire, says she wants this year's march to reflect a diverse group, from senior citizen dykes to the Radical Cheerleaders. She says the march will feature a



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