

Out of Town

Just Out ventures to Yamhill County

Photos by Marty Davis

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LABOR OF LOVE

Don Hutchinson and Lee Swantek have been business and life partners for more than 42 years

BY TOM STEVENSON

After living together, and loving each other, for more than 42 years, there are certain things two people will do. They finish each other's sentences. They give each other looks that only they understand. They laugh at stories of a past rich in memories.

Don Hutchinson and Lee Swantek are two such people. Sitting in their fabulously decorated McMinnville home, the two men openly share a lifetime of memories, spilling out stories about being a gay couple when there was no such thing, about never, ever going to bed mad at one another and about the surprising acceptance they have found in rural Oregon.

To hear their story is to step back in time—way back in time, when gay men who wanted to meet had to visit places that were often less than desirable. The year was 1959, and the two caught each other's gazes at a theater in the Portland area that no longer exists.

Swantek, who says he is 39 years old twice (yes, he's 78), had moved in 1958 from New York City, where he had worked as a bus driver. Hutchinson, who is about a decade younger, also just had moved to Portland. That first meeting was actually a fiasco.

"I looked at him at asked him if he wanted to meet me outside," Hutchinson says. "He said yes. I went outside and waited



They didn't go to the great lengths that other gay men of the era did to hide who they were. Neither one married nor had a relationship with a woman. Both say they knew instinctively early on who and what they were.

Hutchinson and Swantek were looking for someone to love and share life with. They found it. And they certainly made the most of it.

They lived in Portland for about five years, then moved to Newberg. Eventually, they opened a ceramics business together.

The entrepreneurial team soon expanded, teaching classes, offering products at both a wholesale and retail level, and defining roles they would use to make the business a success. Swantek laughs when he explains that Hutchinson was the businessman who handled all the money. But Hutchinson is just as quick to point out that Swantek was the construction miracle worker, putting together with his own hands whatever the business needed.

That kind of teamwork obviously paid off, as the two retired 10

years ago after selling the business, which had grown into a highly successful enterprise. "Not bad to start something with \$250 and make it a half-million-dollar business 30 years later, huh?" Swantek says with another of his warm chuckles.

The two have made their lives work together in a kaleidoscope of other ways as well. Swantek used to do all of the cooking, but today Hutchinson fills that role, although neither is willing to say who is the better chef.

Hutchinson is the artistic one in the relationship. His stunning paintings, ceramic pieces, carousel horses and other items

brighten their McMinnville home, which they purchased after retiring.

Hutchinson is also a dedicated antique collector, filling their rooms with an impressive array of items they have picked up through the years. Swantek proudly explains that many of their pieces date back to the 1800s.

Swantek is a master at making whatever they need in his wood shop. His handiwork is most evident in the couple's gardens, which in June earned them the honor of "Yard of the Month" and a nice feature story in the local newspaper.

Hutchinson is actually the gardener of the two. He has transformed a rather small space into a colorful oasis, thanks in part to the hand-crafted items Swantek has created. Their deck not only is filled with an incredible array of plants but is made welcoming to all by the display of crafts the two have put together.

Obviously, these retirees have not slowed down. The garden and their respective hobbies keep them busy, but they also are quite active in community work.

After moving to McMinnville, Hutchinson and Swantek found a welcoming church—a Baptist congregation nonetheless—where both of

them offer their talents to make it a better place. "There was a little coolness from some people in the church when they found out we were gay, but it's not like that anymore," Hutchinson says.

In fact, the church serves as the meeting place for the couple's current passion: a Christ-centered group they helped create called Together Works, which is open to all gay men and lesbians in Yamhill County. Although it embraces homosexuality and spirituality, nonbelievers are equally welcome.

The semimonthly meetings attract up to 40 people, an equal mix of gay men and lesbians ranging in age from 19 to 78. Anonymity is guaranteed for those who wish it, although this definitely has changed through the years.

"In the beginning, we put paper over the windows so people couldn't see who was in there," Hutchinson says. "Today, we leave the doors wide open."

Together Works has social functions such as potlucks, but the group's most important purpose is to help support one another at all times. Hutchinson and Swantek welcome calls at 503-434-6266 from those who are interested in participating.

One might think an openly gay couple living in rural Oregon for decades would have experienced a huge amount of resistance. That is not the case.

Both say they really never have had any problems. In fact, each Christmas they play host to a huge open house for their friends, neighbors and fellow church members, and their home is filled to the brim with people from all walks of life.



Don Hutchinson (left) and Lee Swantek say their neighbors have been surprisingly accepting

and waited and waited. He didn't show up. He stood me up."

Fortunately, they ran into each other again a few days later. This time, there was no separation.

The two left together. They moved in with each other a short time later and have not been apart since.

The couple took bold steps in building their relationship, especially considering they had absolutely no role models indicating how to make it work. Swantek chuckles as he explains that they moved in together because both were paying rent, and "it was going to be a lot cheaper just paying rent on one place."

