

GROUPS

They're here, they're queer, they're Asian

Diverse group finds commonality in challenges

BY PETER ZUCKERMAN

The dragon's snout zigzagged from one side of the street to the other like a drunken driver. Its flaring ears swept past the crowd, and the rainbow tail inflated in the wind and billowed up and down in long ripples.

But I bet you weren't staring at the dragon. I bet you were scoping out those hottie Asian queers hoisting the beast up on wooden poles during this year's Pride parade.

But who are they?

During the past 10 years Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbians and Gays has metamorphosed from a political organization into a zany social group that sometimes stretches out to defend against the latest Lon Mabon attack.

At one of their get-togethers, while gorging on home-cooked Asian barbecue or talking over dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant, you might encounter a whole salad of people: therapists, marketers, high-tech wizards, chefs, social workers, teen-agers and retired seniors. Their ethnicity ranges from Chinese to Viet-



APLG roars along the Pride 2001 parade route

namese to Laotian to, yes, Caucasian—anyone interested in Asian culture may join the group. However, most of the members have—or want to have—Asian connections.

Go to an APLG event and you also might learn a few things. Maybe you'll find out homosexuals in eastern India get punished by death. Perhaps you'll talk to the Moroccan man who watched four queers get run over by a steam-roller toe to head.

Internationally, Asian culture consists of at least 30 different groups, and many of them do not support queers.

Almost all of them lack gay role models. APLG helps fill that need and can inspire pride in both one's heritage and sexual orientation.

"As Asian and Pacific Islanders, we know what it's like to be raised that way," APLG president Terry Ycasas confides. "Sometimes there are these moments where I say, 'I know what you mean,' and nothing else needs to be said."

The group provides different kinds of support.

"It gives a gay person who's not out a chance to be himself before he goes back to his family and deals with it there," member Meei Lum states. "The group invites people to be open and direct with each other."

APLG also respects those Asians who want to be closeted. For them, "It's a refuge, an oasis where you can take a

breather," explains John David, a board member and the designer of many recent phenomenal Pride floats. "You talk to others of your culture who have already been down the path you're going on. You don't have to explain everything about parents and religion—it's already common knowledge. It's a place where you can build an understanding and trust that's invaluable, where you'd otherwise feel alone."

During APLG events food often serves as a springboard for other social activities. Afterward you might watch the latest Jackie Chan flick or explore the *Imperial Tombs of China* show at Portland Art Museum. Perhaps you'll play a get-to-know-you game involving writing down unknown facts about yourself. Or you might participate in a white elephant gift exchange.

During its annual camping trip, the group white-water rafts down the Deschutes River. It usually commands four rafts and, according to David, way too many water cannons. APLG also plays host to a Chinese Lunar New Year dinner that attracts between 50 and 60 revelers.

People join the group for a variety of reasons. Some are looking for support while they work on discovering themselves. Others go for the networking possibilities, hope to make a love connection or just enjoy building extravagant floats. The laid-back atmosphere of their gatherings provides fertile ground to sprout new friendships.

"A lot of it's about having good, simple fun," Ycasas remarks. "There's a...kinship, a bonding you might not otherwise have within the gay and lesbian community." □

Those interested in joining ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER LESBIANS AND GAYS can call 503-299-0120 or e-mail apl_g_pdx@yahoo.com.



Inset: APLG president Terry Ycasas (left) with Connie; members gather for a holiday party and show their pride

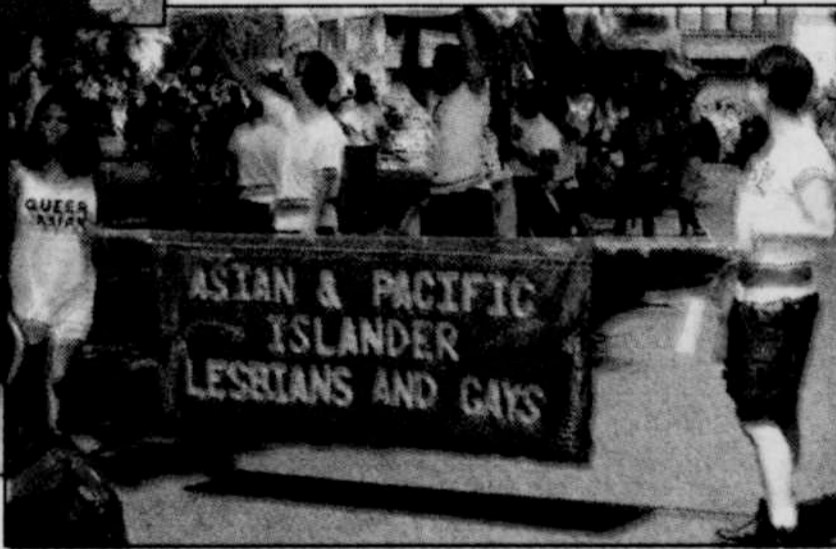


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Noel (left) with float designer extraordinaire John David

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