

J Graigory

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Graigory had a different idea. He said bluntly, "Can I have a job?"

If you want to work in this industry, Asner replied, you have to ask. So he told Graigory to hand over his head shot and résumé.

This led to an internship on the John Ritter-Markie Post sitcom *Hearts Afire*. Graigory went on to earn a bachelor's degree in television production from Loyola Marymount University in 1995 and soon was working on the set of Tom Selleck's short-lived series *The Closer*.

Today, he considers Asner a career mentor. "Every year I go and talk to him and ask, 'Why am I where I am, and why am I not where I want to be?'"

Graigory now works as production coordinator on *The Drew Carey Show*. He proudly calls himself the sitcom's highest-ranking openly gay staff member.

"I am the hub of the bicycle tire that all the spokes go through, but I have no power," he says in describing his position. "I don't make the decisions; I just get the decisions accomplished."

Another unexpected aspect of Graigory's dichotomous life: This out-and-proud queer is the son of a right-wing state legislator, Rep. Donna G. Nelson, R-McMinnville.



State Rep. Donna G. Nelson, Graigory's mother

Even more shocking was her reaction nine years ago when her son told her he was gay: "So what?"

Graigory says that his mom might be politically conservative but that she always has been emotionally supportive. She proved her love soon after he came out to her—by joining him for Gay Pride in West Hollywood.

"She has a resemblance to Elizabeth Taylor, so every gay person driving down Santa Monica Boulevard decided to honk

and scream, and she caused a traffic jam," he says. "So I guess for a first impression she made a good one."

One would think Graigory, who often works up to 14 hours a day on *Drew Carey*, would have little leftover energy for charity work.



Drew Carey and Kathy Kinney star in *The Drew Carey Show*

Drew Carey himself has high praise for his esteemed colleague: "It's an honor to have someone like J Graigory working with us. If only the rest of us followed his example of biking, running and walking for various charities—just think how thin we'd all be."

And Graigory's passion doesn't end there. His experiences at McMinnville High School compelled him to become a vocal advocate for queer youth.

"I was odd," he says of his teen years. "I just exploited my uniqueness. I stopped trying to be normal and fit in like everybody else, and I expanded upon the right to be completely unusual. I used to wear two different color shoes to school. I'd walk down the hallway and start singing an aria just out of the blue."

Graigory still keeps in touch with his high school librarian. Whenever he finishes reading anything, especially gay books and magazines, he sends them to her in hopes that today's queer students won't feel so alone.

"When I went to school in

McMinnville, I swore I could take a pledge that I was the only gay person in the entire world," he says. (As it turns out, he learned at his 10-year reunion that he was one of five out students from the Class of '89.)

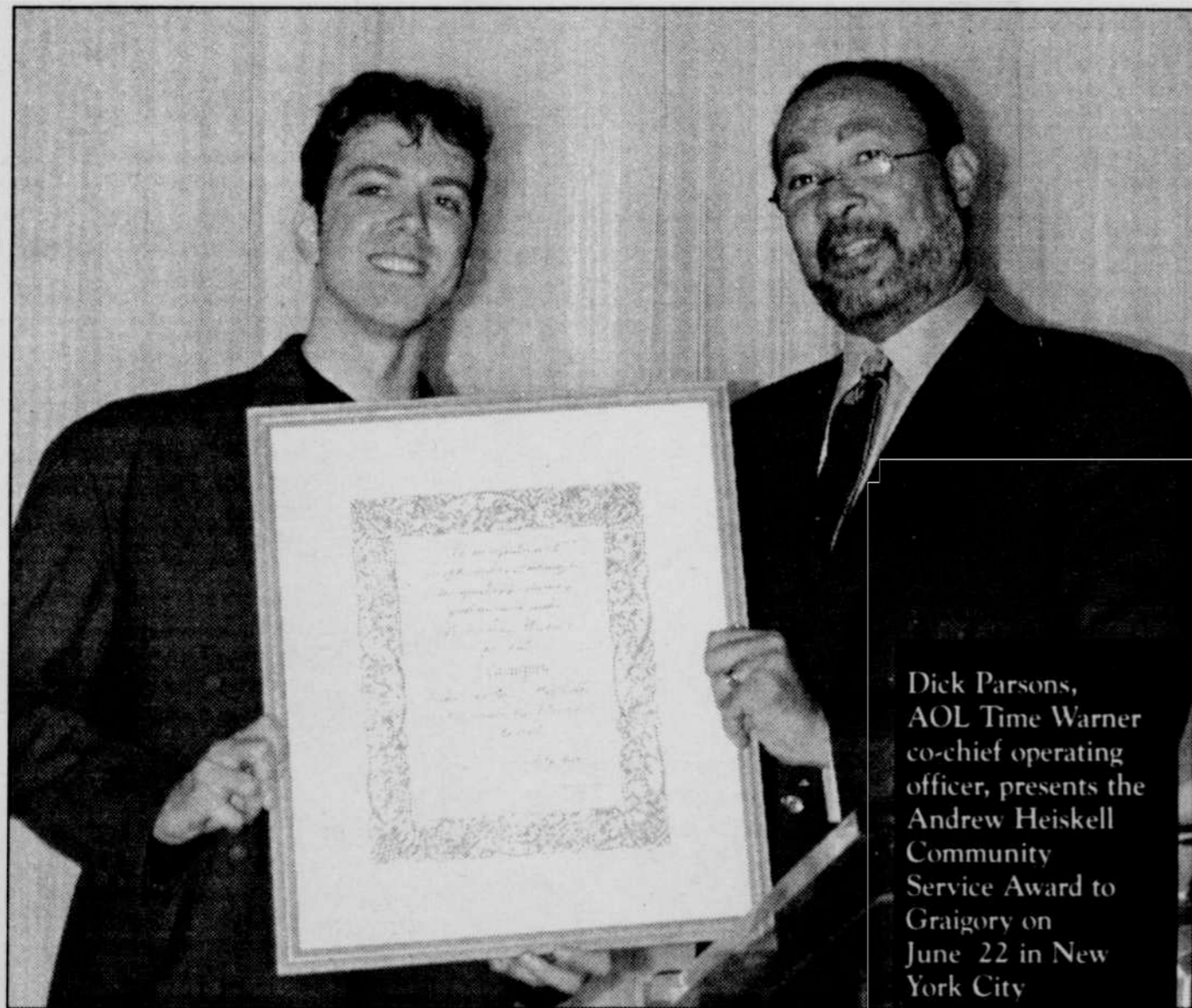
This year Graigory submitted testimony in support of legislation to protect queer students statewide, but it never made it out of committee in Salem. He also writes letters to the editor and educates friends whenever the Oregon Citizens Alliance targets kids.

"You can get rid of every single thing that is homosexual in the world," he says, referring to the censorship that would result if Measure 9 passed. "You cannot turn off someone's heart."

Graigory, who is single, still makes it back to Oregon a few times a year. However, California seems to be rubbing off on him already.

"I've decided I don't think I'm going back during the winters anymore," he says. "They're cold up there." □

To make a tax-deductible donation to the NATIONAL AIDS MARATHON write to J Graigory in care of The Drew Carey Show, 4000 Warner Blvd., Burbank, CA 91522, or visit the Internet site 128.121.81.12/sponsorla.htm and enter "J Graigory 0745." His e-mail address is jgragory@aol.com.



Dick Parsons, AOL Time Warner co-chief operating officer, presents the Andrew Heiskell Community Service Award to Graigory on June 22 in New York City

Somehow, though, he finds the time.

For the past two years he has volunteered in trials for AIDSvax, an experimental vaccine slated for Food and Drug Administration review. In 2000 he parachuted from an airplane to raise \$5,000 for AIDS research.

Graigory's next goal is his loftiest: He plans to raise \$100,000 for the National AIDS Marathon, which will be held Dec. 9 in Honolulu. His confidence is infectious.

"It's just 4,000 people donating \$26.20 each," he says. "That's a dollar a mile."

Graigory already has raised \$20,000 in just one month. So what motivates him to be such a dedicated activist in the fight against AIDS?

"I just don't want it...and I don't want anyone else to get it," he says. "I've seen people die; I've seen people suffer."

Graigory also is a tireless advocate on behalf of rights for the handicapped and has volunteered with the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association, Autry Museum of Western Heritage and Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles. To honor him for his charity work, AOL Time Warner flew him to New York in June to present him with the Andrew Heiskell Community Service Award, the highest honor the corporation gives to its employees.

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