

About 13 years ago, Clackamas resident Marte Sheeran was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Although she is not in a wheelchair and she is pain-free, the disease has drastically altered her life. Sheeran recently retired, and she and her partner have been forced to readjust most details of their day-to-day lives to accommodate MS.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the chronic disease attacks the central nervous system. The body's own defense system attacks the fatty substance surrounding and protecting the nerve fibers of the brain and spinal cord. As a result, nerve impulses to and from the brain are distorted or interrupted.

Symptoms of the disease range from numbness in the limbs to paralysis or loss of vision and affect each person differently. Although medications are available to treat the symptoms, MS has no cure.

Perhaps most notably, two-thirds of those afflicted with MS are women diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 40. Sheeran's own experience with the disease led her to join forces with the Oregon Multiple Sclerosis Society to form a support group specifically for lesbians living with MS.

As she begins the planning process, she is closely studying similar efforts in other cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles. What she is finding is that people living with MS are often more comfortable meeting in support groups where members of the opposite sex are not present.

"San Francisco tried to do a joint group and very quickly found that there are tremen-

A LIFESTYLE DISEASE

Support group for lesbians with multiple sclerosis coming to Portland

by Sarah Leimert

dous differences between how MS affects men and how MS affects women," Sheeran says. "They felt that they had to do two groups."

Because MS often involves very personal symptoms, many women do not feel comfortable discussing them around men. Sheeran would like to provide a safe place for women with MS to give support and discuss issues they might not bring up with anyone else in their lives.

When asked why the group specifically was planned for lesbians and not as a general women's group, she says: "I feel that it would be really helpful to have a support group where we're dealing with the same issues and provide support at that level. I think the same things would be true if you were dealing with an age group or with all women that want to have children and how they deal with MS and have children. The same thing is true for the lesbian community."



Marte Sheeran says people often are uncomfortable discussing the very personal symptoms of MS around members of the opposite sex

Sheeran makes it very clear that MS "a lifestyle disease." Although it is degenerative, it is nonfatal. Because MS is diagnosed relatively early, the symptoms must be dealt with for many years.

Sheeran feels fortunate to have the support that she enjoys at home and that her partner enjoys at work, but she points out not everyone

is so lucky. Many women struggle with MS alone, unable to retire or take care of themselves physically or emotionally. She would like to see these faces among the members of the support group.

In her spare time Sheeran also works with the Portland Area Business Association on its newsletter. She assists the editor in recruiting people to submit articles and become members.

"What I'm trying to do is help us get acquainted with the membership and what they're doing in their businesses and about them as people," Sheeran says. PABA exists "not only to help the members who belong to be able to network...but also to represent the gay and lesbian community to the outside world and show that we are working members of the community."

Although not directly related to Sheeran's work with the Oregon MS Society, PABA will help get the word out to those who are interested in her most recent project. She is looking for women who would like to help build and lead the MS support group, which tentatively is planned to begin meeting this month. □

If you are interested in the LESBIANS WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SUPPORT GROUP call Astrida Berzs at 503-223-9511. For more information about the disease visit the Internet site www.nmss.org.

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