

What a Difference a Day Makes

COMING OUT CHANGES EVERYTHING
BY REBECCA KENNEY

Editor's note: The March 2 issue of Just Out featured a profile of Rebecca Kenney, the first openly gay staff member at Mount Hood Community College. Here, she shares the story of how her life has changed ever since.

So much has happened since Jonathan Kipp's article chronicling the ups and downs of my life—my lesbian life—appeared in print. The *Just Out* piece generated a tremendous response that has continued its ripple effect like a nonstop wave of hope and encouragement one would experience at a Portland Fire game.

The Monday after the article hit newsstands I found myself inundated with phone calls and e-mails. People literally lined up outside my office, and nary a naysayer was among them.

Fabulous! I was thrilled!

Two days earlier, I thought I'd throw up in anticipation of the potential effect this in-depth interview might have on the welfare of our gay and lesbian students, on the overall image of the college and on my career. My worries immediately were abated as I pored over the article.

The ripple had begun. Top administrators, staff and faculty (mostly straight) from Portland, Clackamas, Chemeketa, Lane, Linn-Benton, Umpqua and even Tillamook Bay community colleges contacted me to express their support and ask questions about how to address gay and lesbian issues at their institutions.

Potential students e-mailed me to say they had changed their mind about what school they would attend next fall; Mount Hood Community College would be their new choice. Members of the Pride Students' Alliance dispersed hugs, and even better, I witnessed something new in them: Their eyes and their smiles showed confidence, less shame, more determination to carry on.

Within a couple of weeks, counselors from three East Multnomah County high schools called me. I spoke to each one at length about possible



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



PHOTO BY JIM RADOSTKA

Rebecca Kenney rides through downtown Portland with Dykes on Bikes during Pride 2001 in June (above) and attends the Oregon Hate Crimes Conference in February (left)

means for addressing the fear, hate, violence and ongoing discrimination that exhaust their

gay and lesbian students day after day. During the Spring Dinner Dance in May, the student government named me Adviser of the Year—especially amazing considering last school year was the first time the Pride Students' Alliance truly was recognized as a viable organization. In June, I was presented the Outstanding Staff Award of the Year by the college's president and vice president.

To have been so potentially controversial

during the past year and a half, to have openly fought for our equal rights and then to win these prestigious honors from both the student body and the staff, faculty and administration just meant the world to me. Not only because I worked hard and because it's wonderful to receive such recognition, but because I was judged not by what I am but by what I accomplished for the good of us all.

It gives me such joy and hope that the college would honor an openly gay staff member. It makes me believe Mount Hood can be the kind of inclusive educational institution I know it wants to be.

Countless positive changes have occurred as a direct result of *Just Out* running that article. I could talk about the Manager's Handbook that no longer defines "family" as a husband, wife and children. I could tell you about meeting with the human resources director and working together to include sexual orientation as a protected group in the college-wide discrimination policy. I could tell you about how our new president was the first in line at the Pride Students' Alliance bake sale and how he bought the prettiest triangle cookie covered in a rainbow of frosting.

All of these changes are phenomenal, and some are beyond what I ever had hoped for myself and for Mount Hood Community College. The greatest gift, however, is that by sharing my story for all to scrutinize, I forever have changed the devastating influence shame has had on my life. For a long time, internalized shame because of who I am and who I love resulted in deprivation of dignity, self-respect and pride.

Shame is now my emotion of revolution. Let's all revolt. ☐

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