

Red, White & Blues

National crisis leaves gays and lesbians feeling frustrated

There's no question that everyone in the United States was affected by Sept. 11—thousands died, while the rest of us are left to endure a time of war, recession and anxiety. And although each person's situation is unique, the impact of that day has revealed a number of struggles that are making life especially difficult for the sexual minorities community.

Within days of the terrorist attacks, thousands of people were standing in line for hours at the American Red Cross, but sexually active gay men are banned from donating blood. The country is at war, but gays can't serve openly in the military.

Meanwhile, binational couples are facing a growing crackdown on immigration. Others who lost loved ones during the terrorist attacks are forced to deal with disparities in getting the assistance they need.

Adding to our troubles is the sorry state of the national economy, especially when it comes to travel. Because the hospitality industry employs a large number of sexual minorities, this has become another devastating side effect of Sept. 11.

Here, *Just Out* takes a look at how the day that changed the United States also changed the sexual minorities community.

TOURIST TRAP

Horrific hijackings force travel agents to renew customer confidence by Tom Stevenson

The terrorists attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., set off a chain of events that heavily affected the hospitality industry in every corner of the world. Although planes only were grounded for a couple of days, the emotional grounding of travelers has taken a lot longer to heal.

Tourism businesses in Portland have not escaped the impact. The hospitality industry is heavily represented by members of the sexual minorities community, many of whom have seen both good and bad results since Sept. 11.

According to Skip Rognien, owner of Sullivan's Gulch Bed and Breakfast in Portland, with the exception of the first couple of days after the attacks, his establishment has not seen a decline in customers. In fact, he says he actually has gained some business.

"One couple said that they had not planned to go anywhere but to bolster the economy came here for a week for shopping," says Rognien, who has been a proud member of the gay community since he came out at age 16 some 50 years ago. "It seems like many gay and lesbian travelers are not daunted by recent events."

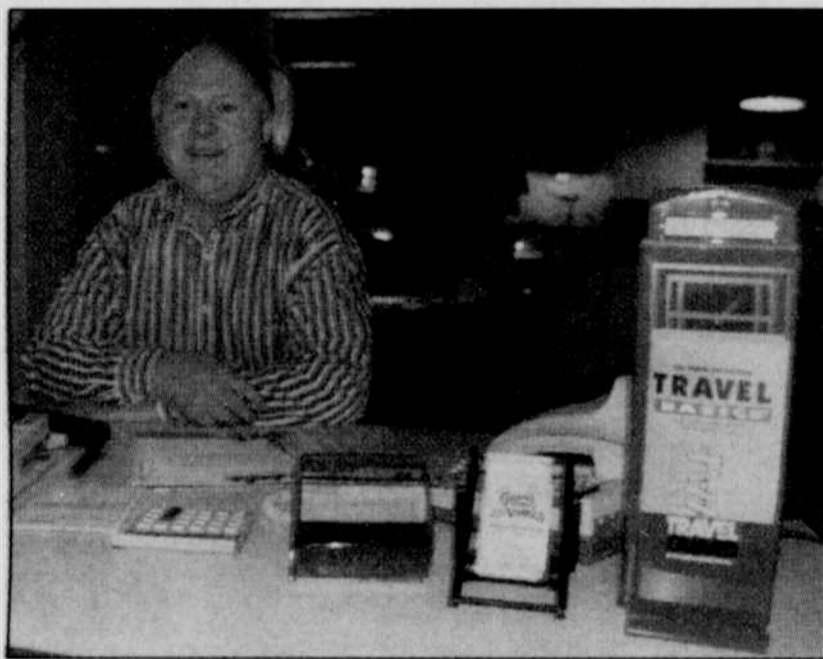
Not everyone has been quite as lucky. Phillip Richardson, sales manager at the Westin Portland Hotel, says the attacks, along with an already weakening economy, definitely have affected business.

"The hospitality industry as a whole has seen a pretty significant decline in both business and leisure travel," he says. "The economy was already looking bleak prior to the Sept. 11 events, with high unemployment and people being more cautious with their money. And of course now, economic conditions are worse."

Nonetheless, Richardson sees reasons to remain optimistic. "I believe that we have not been hit nearly as hard as primary markets like San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle, as those are high-profile, major-market cities," he adds. "And the fact that most of the recent events have taken place on the East Coast helps our markets slightly."

All of those involved in the hospitality industry have felt the pressures of "belt tightening" because of a slowdown in business. Lanning Blanks, a gay man who owns Portland's White House, has seen a 5 percent to 10 percent decrease in business since Sept. 11.

"Fortunately, we have not had to lay any staff off due to a lack of travelers," he says. However, "We are monitoring our labor closely in



Norm Nevers believes travel is safer than ever since Sept. 11

response to the slowdown."

Travel agents also have been forced to get creative, as their business has suffered during the trauma of the past couple of months.

Norm Nevers, another active member of the gay community and an agent at Gulliver's Travels in Portland, says he and other members of the company are finding new ways to attract business. "We are actively working the Internet, calling current clients to advise them of great travel bargains now available and try to reassure anyone who asks us that travel is still safe."

Despite what many might see as bleak conditions, all of those interviewed were in complete agreement that right now might be the best time for members of the gay and lesbian community to take that long-awaited trip. All also insist traveling is indeed safe—maybe safer than ever.

"Now is the time to experience new places and new things," Richardson says. "Prices are very low for flying, staying at hotels...even restaurants are dropping their prices to lure people in. Department stores are having deals. Just live life."

Nevers adds: "I truly believe it is much safer to travel now than it ever has been. Your travel adviser should be your resource to advise you if they feel travel is not advisable to a certain area. Otherwise, go with confidence and have fun."

Blanks says: "Flying, although currently inconvenient, is still one of the safest modes of transportation. Immediately following the attacks we had a vacation scheduled in Hawaii. Rather than canceling, we kept with our plans. With the security measures in place and the extra awareness travelers exhibited, we felt completely safe."

Joan Sher, a consultant with GK Ltd. Travel, says she has spent a great deal of time in the past few months attending seminars and familiarizing herself further about destinations. Her goal is to soothe the fears of her clients and "pamper" them.

Sher also notes she, along with the other mem-



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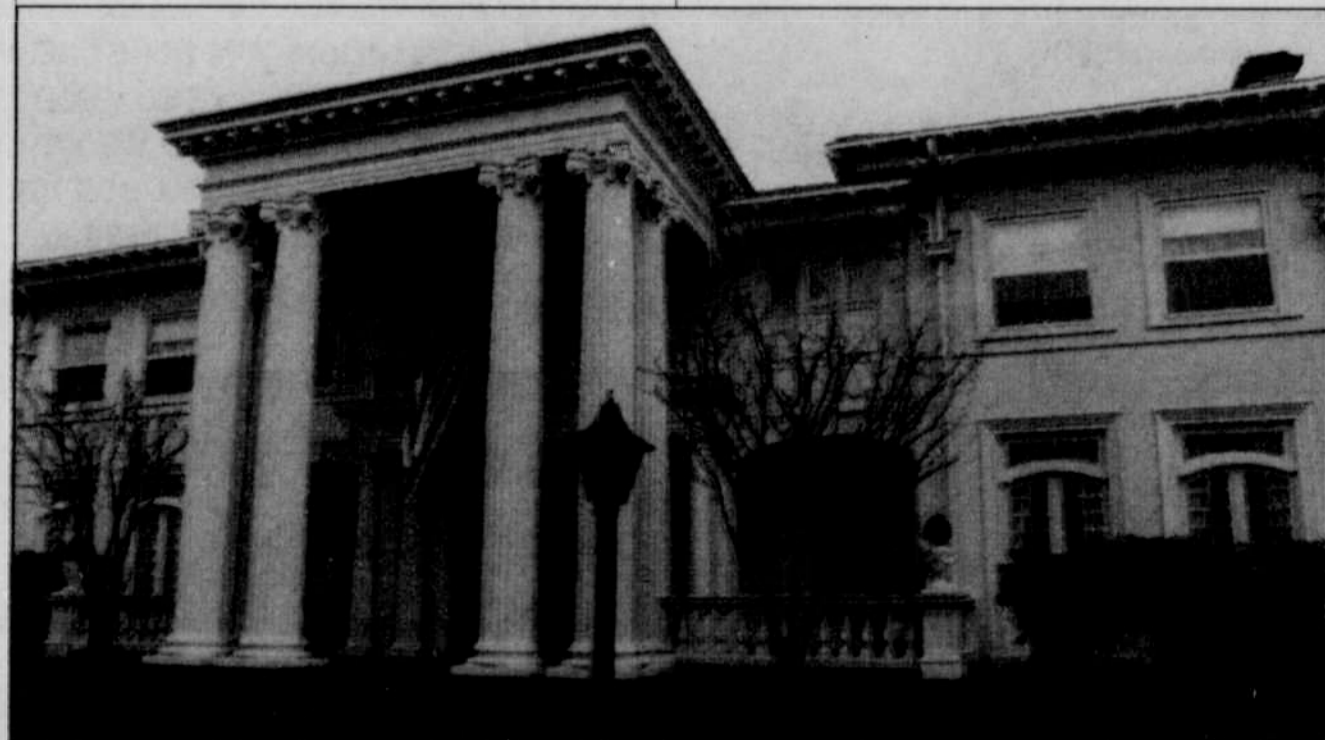
bers of her family, have been traveling extensively since Sept. 11. Her recommendation is quite simple: With the lower costs of travel, now really is the time to live it up.

"As far as destinations that feel safer if one is particularly concerned, I would recommend that now is the time to go on a cruise, go to Hawaii or another sunny destination like Mexico or the Caribbean," Sher says. "Forget all your troubles and just relax."

Richardson perhaps sums it up best in discussing the fear some travelers are facing.

"When you see the measures being taken at the airports and our borders...you have to realize that flying has never been more safe," he says. "It may be a little more of a hassle to deal with the new security measures, but to ensure that I have a safe flight or that my hotel is secure, that is an inconvenience I am happy to have. I think people need to live their lives." □

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Business is down 5 percent to 10 percent at Portland's White House