

CAMPUS COALITION

Student groups come together to create a statewide alliance

by Tom Stevenson

There is a quiet force at work trying to tackle a number of issues facing the sexual minorities community, and if some of the participants have anything to say about it, you will be hearing a lot more from them.

That force is a group of college students who are active in the gay, lesbian, bi and trans groups on their respective campuses. In early November they gathered to brainstorm ways to work as a stronger coalition as part of the Northwest Student Leadership Conference.

According to lesbian student Denise Renfrow, vice president of Mount Hood Community College's Q Group, representatives from at least nine Oregon colleges participated in the discussion. She and gay student Chad Chamberlain, co-coordinator of Portland State University's Queers and Allies, say the issues discussed were diverse.

Topics included funding, Employment Nondiscrimination Act enforcement, protection for sexual minority faculty and staff, technical assistance, role models, recruitment, sexual minorities of color, freshmen orientation, "one-stop shopping" for resources and information, phobias, hate violence and residence halls for sexual minority students and their supporters. "We view these as issues for queers on a statewide level," Chamberlain says.

With a list as long as that one, clearly no single group can tackle even a few of those issues alone, and that is one of the key reasons the collegiate organizations are joining forces.

"We're currently working on creating a queer statewide alliance that would help to organize and work on queer issues on campuses statewide," Chamberlain says.

Renfrow adds that the fledgling statewide group plans three more gatherings.

"We are intending on having monthly meetings," she says. "We are hoping to network so we can get things done together. We are trying to have an actual structure."

The three major tasks the coalition is focusing on are unisex bathrooms, training and legislation. Chamberlain says the group wants to know "what the issues are, where they're going and who our allies are."

The new "voice" being created by the collegiate groups could grow to be a strong one, which is something that excites Chamberlain.

"I really feel that what we're getting started here is going to definitely bring some power to the people whose voices may not be heard or are often under- or misrepresented," he says. "Just having representation of nine queer student groups in one room was a first, and being able to network across campuses will make available more resources than we've ever known before."

Renfrow notes a tremendous amount of work remains.

"We still have to work on discrimination issues, both within ourselves, the student body, the staff and faculty bodies and the community," she says. "The GLBT population definitely has its own stereotypes and discriminators."

Still, Renfrow notes, the new coalition is a giant step forward. Students will continue to hold events such as Queer Awareness Week and training sessions for the staff and faculty bodies to raise overall awareness of the issues further.

"We have to keep the vision before we can accomplish anything," Renfrow says. "My hope is that we can start a coalition that will burn brightly into the future and pave the way for



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

"Just having representation of nine queer student groups in one room was a first"

—Chad Chamberlain

queer students everywhere and be a role model for getting discrimination handled and tasks accomplished."

Chamberlain is counting on members of the greater sexual minorities community not only to acknowledge the work being done by the collegiate organizations but also to throw in their support. "Our groups as a whole are trying to make things better and more consistent across campuses in Oregon for queer students and staff members," he says.

Renfrow adds: "I think that the queer community should understand our point: This is a manageable level of activism for many people who see what is going wrong and want to effect change. We need to do something about what we see silently eroding the streets for queers and preventing them from being equal people in our society."

Neither Chamberlain nor Renfrow is naive enough to think the changes will happen immediately. Still, they anticipate the new coalition will help make campuses safer and more comfortable for all members of the sexual minorities community.

It will be take a great deal of hard work, the two activists insist. In the words of Renfrow, positive change is brought about "one brick at a time, one step at a time and with ideas both gigantic and small to fuel the machine." □

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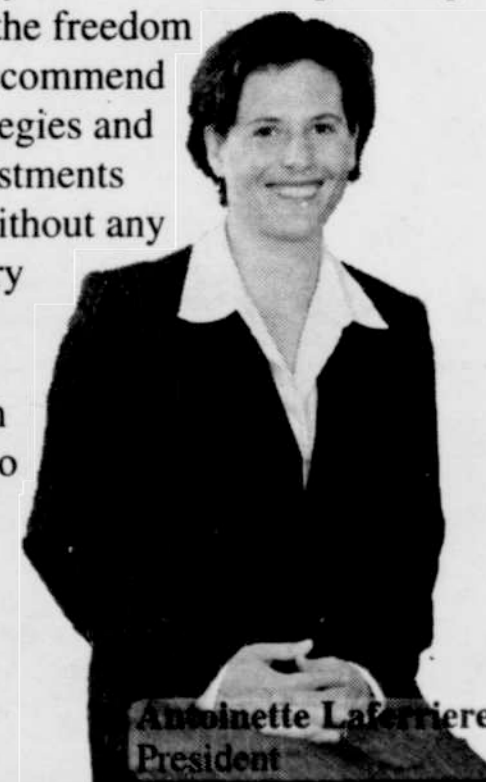
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