

If you want to make a difference in your community, you have to get involved.

That's a rally cry public officials use repeatedly, and Bret Palma and Jim Maguire have taken the message to heart. Beaverton Mayor Rob Drake and the rest of the City Council recently appointed the gay men to serve three-year terms on the Human Rights Advisory Commission.

Although they are relative newcomers to the Portland suburb, they have long-term interests in human rights issues. Palma, a resident of Beaverton for the past year and a half, and Maguire, who moved there only six months ago, both are excited about the opportunity.

"When I first moved to Beaverton, I decided I wanted to get involved politically, being convinced that many Beaverton citizens had not had much positive exposure to gays," Maguire says. "I was thinking that I could represent the community intelligently and fairly and maybe break a few preconceived notions along the way."

The commission was created in 1993 with an ambitious mission statement: "Promoting mutual understanding and safeguarding the rights of all citizens." Palma says its goals include "embracing and celebrating diversity, eliminating bigotry and enhancing a sense of community."

The panel is designed to be representative of the city. "Currently the commission looks like a miniature United Nations and has two gay members, so it seems to be meeting its demographic goal as well," Palma says.

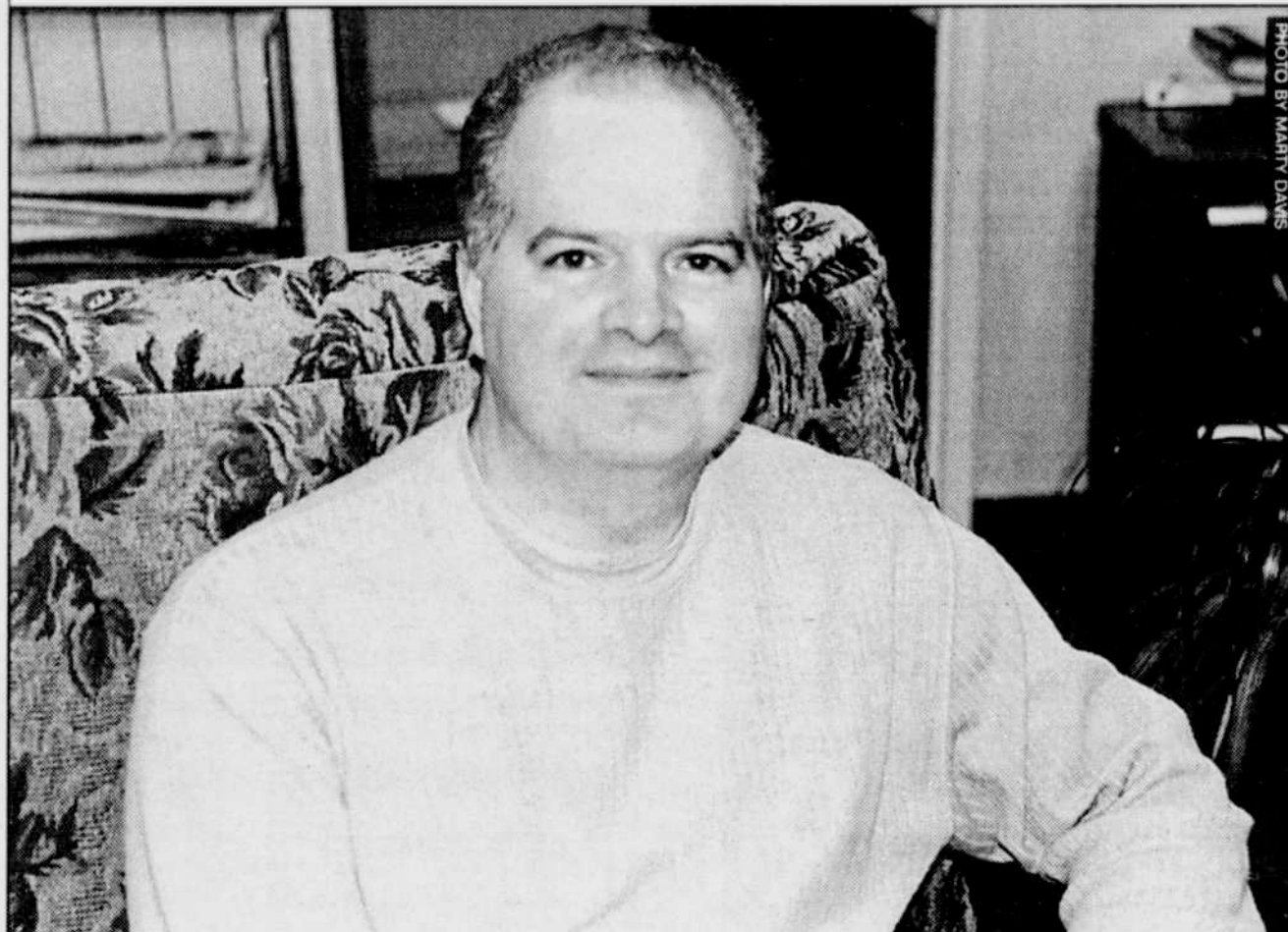
The members' duties are to:

- Promote harmonious intergroup relations within the city of Beaverton by enlisting the cooperation of various racial, religious and nationality groups; business, community, labor, governmental, fraternal and benevolent associations; educational and other groups.
- Examine sources of tension and practices of discrimination within the community; and acts of prejudice by employees of the city of Beaverton.
- Perform conciliatory services that do not conflict with the functions of any other government agency or city department.
- Make recommendations concerning solutions to specific problems of prejudice or discrimination.
- Recommend to the City Council action, policies and legislation to be considered by the state and local governments.

The commission also is planning multicultural events, such as Heritage Days, which will take place this summer. It especially is concerned with prejudice directed toward people of

## THE RIGHTS STUFF

Two gay men battle bigotry in Beaverton by Tom Stevenson



Bret Palma co-founded the first gay, lesbian and bi youth support group in Portland during the mid-1980s

Middle Eastern descent in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Palma and Maguire—who live with their partners and work in the Beaverton area—take their appointments seriously. However, they are quick to note they have not felt any major prejudice since moving there.

"My experience has been very positive, more positive than I expected honestly," Maguire says. "I was mentally ready to have bricks or rocks thrown through my windows when we finally bought a house and moved in. But so far I have not experienced any adverse reactions."

Palma echoes those feelings but admits he has not lived in the area that long. "Personally, I've encountered very little homophobia," he says.

The men bring contrasting backgrounds to the human rights communal table. Participating in his first public post as an out gay man, Maguire insists he is not an activist.

"I consider myself a well-traveled, well-spoken person whose life experiences to this point lend me a unique perspective on community, especially human rights," he says. "I have traveled the world both while in the military and as a civilian, and I think I can bring a balanced, enlightened perspective to the commission."

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—Jim Maguire

Maguire says two key experiences in his life led him to the human rights field. First, his little brother was born with Down syndrome. "I have always had someone in my life that other people did not understand, looked at funny, teased and made assumptions regarding his potential simply based on his Down syndrome," he says. "By constantly being supportive of my brother, helping my parents fight for his education rights and defending him against people who

made fun of him, I have literally grown up educating people around me to be sensitive to their prejudices."

Maguire, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, also was affected by his time spent in the military. He had anticipated a long and successful career, but "the stress of having to stay in the closet forced me to make the choice to resign my commission."

He did not quit under pressure. He simply knew he was gay and wanted to be in a relationship, and even though his sexual orientation had no effect on his ability to be a great naval officer, the prejudices were built in to make a military career too stressful.

Maguire says the entire experience forever changed him. It "crystallized my desire to ensure that someday another kid who wants to serve his country can do so without having to drive him or herself to the edge of mental collapse due to the stress and strain of staying in the closet."

Palma has been an activist on and off through the years. His human rights efforts began during the mid-1980s when as a teen-ager he co-founded Windfire, the first gay, lesbian and bi youth support group in Portland.

As a substitute teacher in several area school districts, he says that sexual minority students and staff generally are treated fairly but that much work remains. "The goal...should be to treat gay and straight teachers exactly the same as their straight colleagues."

Unfortunately, that is not the case. For example, Palma says if a straight teacher talked about a spring break trip with a spouse, nobody would care. But if a gay or lesbian instructor shared the same news about a vacation with a partner, "some administrations would flip their lids. That reaction is unacceptable and discriminatory."

Both men insist the political work in their community is a natural extension and encourage others to get involved. "Find something which most appeals to your interests and go for it," Palma says.

Maguire adds: "Open your mind and get involved. Forget all the social programming you had growing up, then make the first phone call, send in your bid to be a commissioner or whatever. Take the first step." □

For more information about the HUMAN RIGHTS ADVISORY COMMISSION visit the Internet site [www.ci.beaverton.or.us/mayor/hark.html](http://www.ci.beaverton.or.us/mayor/hark.html).

TOM STEVENSON is a Portland free-lance writer and a full-time Portland State University student who can be reached at [ruraltom@yahoo.com](mailto:ruraltom@yahoo.com).

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