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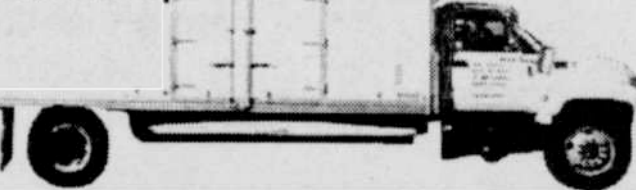
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NORTHWEST news

A MAN OF MANY LABELS

Meet Michael Lowe, gay Native American veteran

by Susan Detroy

When Michael Lowe came out of the closet in 1972, he had a lot of labels. "I was a gay Native American vet, and I was very proud of all of those."

Born in Port Angeles, Wash., he spent his life on the Olympic Peninsula until he was drafted at 19. In the service he "stuck to the book and made sergeant."

After coming out Lowe ran away to Portland, where life changed considerably. "In those days things were pretty open. We could walk hand in hand downtown. I got into a relationship and I got into the world of drag queens."

Walking into his first gay bar, the Rhonde, he secured a job and a place to stay during his first day in town. He immediately formed close connections with the patrons.

"Everybody was welcome there," Lowe remembers. "We had drag queens. We had the leather boys. We had the 'afternoon Tupperware party'...those who would come in and sit in a big group and have their daily meetings. I was very fortunate because I developed an open relationship with both men and women."

He explains he missed out on this comfort level while growing up as the middle child in a large family of 12. "Half the time nobody knew if we were home or not. It was nice to come in [to the bar] and be acknowledged by a group of people and feel that I belonged."

Lowe's next job was at Queen's Kitchen at Best Western Kingsway Inn, where he developed his talent for making people laugh. "I guess that became what the story of my life was—to make sure I never met a stranger. Everybody I meet, there is something about them that sticks with me."

In 1984 he moved to Eugene. He soon was working at Perry's on Pearl, a gay-owned bar and restaurant.

"It was just like the family I had in Portland," Lowe says. "I wanted everybody to feel comfortable no matter where they came from."

He viewed his work as a way for customers to get to know a gay man. "I dropped that 'gay Native American veteran' thing. You know, I'm Michael. And that's who I am today."

Lowe's unique talent for serving customers followed him to his job at the Mission, a Mexican restaurant where he dressed up for holidays, coming to work one year as an Easter bunny, another as an Easter basket. In 1996 the *Register-Guard* named him "best waiter of the year."

His exuberant, fun-loving nature has created a wide circle of acquaintances. "There is not a place I go where I don't run into somebody that I know and has touched me in some way."

After turning 50, Lowe made a few life changes, trying catering and losing 65 pounds. A friend in the process was Larry Garcia, a public health nurse. "He taught me a lot about learning to love myself, that I was really OK and that I didn't need to hide behind the facade of



Michael Lowe (left) and Dale Carrington celebrate their commitment ceremony July 8, 1999

always being a happy-go-lucky guy," Lowe says.

Garcia comments: "Michael's spiritual perspective and connection to his community of friends is a model for what is good about being gay. He is a man who inspires love."

Lowe met his partner, Dale Carrington, playing pool at Neighbors Bar & Bistro. "I thought at 50, there was nobody left for someone my age. I discovered with a good attitude there is always someone there."

Feeling comfortable spending time at Neighbors led to a job at the gay bar starting last year. "It was like full circle...and it was like working with friends."

Lowe is a member of the Jamestown S'klallam tribe, and his grandmother was S'klallam, Skykomish and Bella-Colla. Three years ago he and Carrington, whose mother is Lakota, had a Native American ceremony.

"You are two people going to the mountain and coming back as one and you are wrapped in a blanket and presented to your extended family," he says. "Everyone in the circle, once the circle is sealed, becomes your immediate family."

Lowe says if you have an argument you must go to each person from the circle. "If you had 80 in the circle, by the time you got to No. 40 you might feel it is all ridiculous."

From an early marriage he has two children: Heather, 33, and Sean, 30. An approaching highlight is the April arrival of his first grandchild.

This month Lowe turns 55, becoming an elder in his tribe. He will be doing the eagle dance, taking him into another life stage.

"I am content and I am happy," he says. "I am not after the big things in life. I have already had them. Most of that is the friendships that I have made." □

SUSAN DETROY is a Eugene free-lance writer.