

MIRAGE OR OASIS?



Halfway between Portland and San Francisco appears welcome relief in Ashland

by Timothy Krause

With the natural beauty of the Rogue Valley, the sophisticated culture of professional theater and the academic resources of higher education, Ashland residents say life in their small town is just dandy.

The warm climate is comfortable. The daily pace is relaxed. Just as many faces on Main Street are friends as strangers.

Not only has this small, rural community become a haven for the artsy and a retreat for the retired, but Ashland also offers a refuge for sexual minorities in search of a place to fit in among the rough-and-tumble hills of the Rogue Valley. In fact, the city of 20,000 is one of the few in Oregon that recognizes same-sex domestic partnerships.

"It's beautiful. It's gorgeous. It's a pocket of

cultural diversity," proclaims Deanna Leitner, president of Southern Oregon University's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Allies Student Union. "It's not so rush-rush. You don't have the high pressure. And there's not nearly as much rain."

Yet, as inviting and accommodating as Ashland is, within such isolation lie challenges to everyday life for sexual minorities. "Being young, single and gay in this area is an extreme challenge," says Ed Burns, co-chairman of the Abdill-Ellis Community Center, a queer resource facility.

Because employment and educational opportunities are limited, young people tend to leave the area, at least for a time. It's not uncommon to grow up in Ashland, move to a larger city such as Portland, then return to the Rogue Valley upon middle age or retirement.

Burns suggests the same pattern holds true for the less-than-straight set, but with a twist.

"It doesn't matter what people's ages are. It's more in terms of their coming-out process," he theorizes. "If they are just coming out, they are still in that perception where they need to go to a bigger city, where it's more acceptable and there are more opportunities. Then, once life settles down, they return."

But often not alone.

When David Dreyfoos, producing director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, moved to Ashland some five years ago, he observed that many gay men and lesbians in the area are partnered or have sought solitude in the seclusion of the countryside. While numerous businesses are gay-owned or gay-friendly, without the typical gay scene such as bars and nightclubs, vacationers and newcomers alike find that networking among family, friends and colleagues is vital when opportunities to meet socially are limited.

Beyond city limits, however, the landscape turns more stark.

"How you act in Medford is entirely different than how you would act in Ashland. We gather 99 percent of the time in Ashland because everybody feels more comfortable here," relates Les Krambeal, co-chairman of the

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus of Southern Oregon.

Burns elaborates: "Ashland is unique in the area because it has a reputation of being rather progressive and very enlightened. It attracts those kinds of people, and yet it sits right in the middle of redneck country. It's kind of an oasis in the middle of a vast wasteland."

Just Out recently journeyed to Ashland to learn how four key organizations—university, community center, theater and political caucus—make this gay, lesbian, bi and trans oasis more than a mere mirage. **J**

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