

When it opened in 1996, the Abdill-Ellis Community Center was hailed by sexual minorities from around the state as a milestone in the fostering of positive integration. Following upon the tragic loss of two Ashland leaders, Michelle Abdill and Roxanne Ellis, the facility was created as a positive bridge to the general population while providing an affirming support network for gay, lesbian, bi and trans individuals.

Immediately, the center set about finding ways for community members to meet, socialize and support each other. The organization rented a large facility with a dance floor and scheduled monthly activities. Participation was encouraging, but the group was soon in over its head financially.

More importantly, co-chairman Ed Burns says, the center drifted from its mission as a social service agency. Five years after opening, it was on the verge of closing its doors for good.

"Things really fell apart," acknowledges Burns, who has served on the board of directors for two years. "It was a lot chaos. It was a lot of turmoil. And it was a lot of financial difficulties, too."

He believes the center began to lose favor with the community when it began to lose touch with its constituents' primary needs. Personal conflicts started to pull apart the organization as it tried to fulfill diverging demands.

"We had become more of an entertainment committee for the gay community. It was very expensive, for one thing, and it wasn't what the funding sources were giving us money to do," Burns cites. "There were people who wanted the center to become their life. It was kind of just a bigger closet for them. So that's what we tried to do, and in doing so, we isolated ourselves from the community at large because there was a lot of concern" that people would be outed.

The center was ailing, and only a few core members tended to its needs. They wanted to make it work, but before they agreed to continue the struggle, they asked themselves important questions: Are the needs of the community now served by other organizations, such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and the youth-oriented Not

FINDING YOUR CENTER

Fallen from fame, Ashland's gay community center rebuilds its reputation by returning to its roots

Volunteers publish a monthly newsletter, maintain a Web site and staff a hot line that averages several calls a day. Its new location houses a lending library and serves as an available space for meetings and activities.

Even as center volunteers realized they couldn't do everything, they also recognized they were not alone. "Collaboration" became a key word for its leaders and has resulted in joint projects with area service providers.

Jackson County Health and Human Services, for example, offers anonymous HIV testing and counseling at the center. And soon the nonprofit will work with the Southern Oregon University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Allies Student Union to hire a mental health therapist for crisis intervention work on campus.

"We really want to work together with other organizations that have the same general issues of fairness and treating human beings as human beings," co-chairman Jesse Freeborn says.

Yet all along, the chief accomplishment of the organization has been even more basic—to make people aware of southern Oregon's thriving sexual minorities community. "My personal goal," Burns comments, "is to incorporate who we are and what we do into the community at large."

Freeborn adds, "I want to make it easier for people to come out, easier for people who have been out for years to connect with other people and to be a positive influence in the community." □

For more information about the ABDILL-ELLIS COMMUNITY CENTER call 541-488-6990 or visit the Internet site www.abdellis.org.



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



The community center is named in honor of Michelle Abdill and Roxanne Ellis, who were shot to death in 1995

Straight, Not Sure? Are people feeling so safe and accepted that the center is no longer necessary? Should it close its doors?

"We made a focus of going back to the community and asking what they want from the center—and doing our best to provide that, with the understanding that we can't be the end-all and be-all for the entire community. We have to maintain some parameters in terms of the services that we provide," Burns says.

The center scaled back activities and scrambled to balance its books once again. The group discontinued its staff director position and began to rely on volunteers. In another cost-saving measure, the center eventually moved into a church basement.

Today, the nonprofit still sponsors social events, although much less frequently and often with an underlying intent of supporting other programs, such as the dissemination of health information. The main concentration now is to serve as an information and referral center about activities and services in the region.



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

The Joseph Laundry Salon

602 SE 38th Ave.
Portland, OR 97214
503.231.3922
Wed - Sat

PAUL MITCHELL

World Accents

Travel Arrangements
Tailored to Your Needs

Clint Schrader

6547 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Hwy
Portland, Oregon 97225
(Raleigh West Shopping Center)

503-292-0675
fax 503-292-9386
1-888-317-8886
clint@worldaccents.com
www.worldaccents.com

Casual
Elegance
For Less

Furniture
Art
Accessories

Cachet

CONSIGNMENT

503-620-8886
7800 SW DURHAM RD. STE. 400
TIGARD, OR 97132
WWW.CACHETCONSIGNMENT.COM

It's My Pleasure

Sexy Gifts - Exciting Ideas
and Unique Apparatus

Corner of Sandy Blvd. & NE 64th
3106 NE 64th Portland, OR 97213

503-280-8080