

# RAINBOW CONNECTION

## Counselors form social group for sexual minority Jews

by Nadia Cannon

David Molko and Laney Kibel knew that sexual minority Jews in Portland felt disconnected, but they didn't realize the extent of it when they decided to form Keshet, a social group for this segment of the queer community.

It all started in May, when they brought several people together for a screening of the acclaimed documentary *Trembling Before G-d*. The film opened a gate, and the two blazed right through it.

One month later, about 30 people came to a dinner on a Friday night. The participants were amazed to find a spiritual community where they didn't have to hide their sexuality. Many left that night feeling renewed and determined to keep the group going.

Keshet, which is Hebrew for rainbow, has attracted an array of members ranging in age from 18 to 70 and in religious fervor from lax "cultural" Jews to Orthodox. The less traditional Jews have found a spirituality they were missing, while Orthodox Jews finally have located a community that can accept them both as gay and Jewish.

A total of 23 people gathered at the home of Paul Davis, a Love Makes a Family intern, for the second meeting of the group June 30. The evening began with a drash, or short commentary about the Torah. Liz Caplan offered her words: "A project like ours will help others to come."

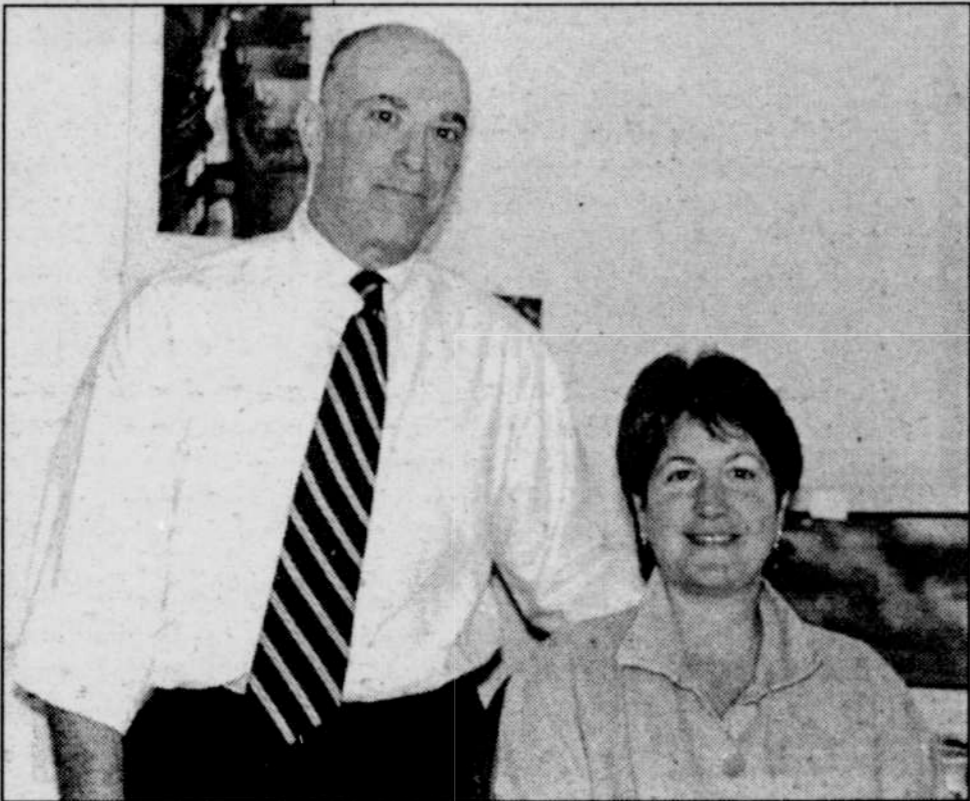
A theme throughout the meeting was that of choice. Many previously had been forced to decide between their identities: gay or Jewish. Keshet helps them avoid the choice altogether.

Kibel and Molko—who work with adults, adolescents, couples and groups as counselors at Jewish Family & Child Service—are experiencing a spiritual renaissance as a result of the social group. Both have been somewhat distant from religion in their adult lives and are thrilled to be participating in a Jewish community again.

Molko has felt since he was young that it "was not cool to be gay in a Jewish context." Although Kibel herself did not suffer because of her Judaism, she noted that the convergence of the two is a "double whammy" for many.

Ira Streitfeld, who moved to Portland 10

months ago with his partner of 28 years, Jerry Freidman, believes a spirituality he never has experienced is in its nascence. He says he left organized religion when he first came out of the closet "because I was handling my new lifestyle on my own. I was hiding from God."



David Molko and Laney Kibel have ambitious plans for Keshet

Streitfeld's gratitude is jubilant. "I am beginning to feel more a part of the world again. I feel more support. I feel like I belong, I have a voice. Once more, I am a participant in life, not merely a spectator."

Caplan is more observant than many other Keshet members. She belongs to a Modern Orthodox religious group, where she says her sexuality isn't an issue. "I have many Orthodox friends who just don't really care, or pretend that it doesn't matter in my presence."

For Caplan, Judaism is a more central part of her identity than her lesbianism. But for other Orthodox members of Keshet, their observance proves thorny.

The Torah, the guiding book in Judaism, has a passage that can be interpreted to prohibit homosexuality. But Rabbi Gary Schoenberg of P'nai Or says it must be viewed in context: "Judaism is a religion that holds the celebration and value of life at its center... anyone who forces GLBT people into the closet runs the risk of being complicitous in death."

Keshet will celebrate Sukkot, a September harvest festival, by building a Sukkah, a small tent made of wood, branches and decorations. Although it will be a new experience for Molko and Kibel, the theme of rebuilding is a common one, and both are accustomed to the struggle.

Kibel is ambitious about Keshet's future; she has visions of using the Internet to create a resource hub for sexual minority Jews. She and Molko already are looking ahead to Passover next spring.

Their personal and professional goals are clear: Keep reaching out to include people who have felt alone in the past. Keshet is indeed becoming a queer family. □

KESHET'S next Shabbat dinner will be held 6:30 p.m. Aug. 16. For location call David Molko at 503-226-7079, ext. 14.

Intern NADIA CANNON will enter her junior year this fall at Smith College in Northampton, Mass. E-mail her at [nadia@justout.com](mailto:nadia@justout.com).

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These are some of the congregations and spiritual organizations that openly support sexual minority Jews:

- Reconstructionist: Havurah Shalom.
- Reform: Beth Israel.
- Conservative: Nevah Shalom.
- Traditional: Shaarie Torah.

• Geshet: This Jewish outreach program is dedicated to serving those who are not part of other congregations. P'nai Or also welcomes sexual minority Jews.