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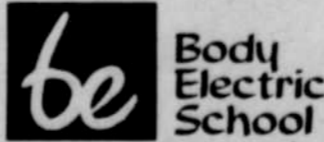


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NORTHWEST news



Byron Beck realizes he can't please everyone

A CRACK IN THE WINDOW

Continued from Page 1

Beck didn't address his sexuality until after high school. While studying theater at a small-town Washington college, he fell in love with his best friend.

The relationship splintered, however, when Beck came out of the closet. Once interest in love—and money for college—dwindled, he left school behind to spend the summer with family in the Gorge and friends in Portland.

Beck's curiosity pushed him toward the bigger city of Seattle, where he briefly studied acting at University of Washington. Gay bars, however, quickly took center stage for him, and he returned to Portland, where he found it easier to play the scene.

He went out every night, thinking that's what queers like him did. But he was still underage and eventually was expelled from the bars altogether. So, Beck returned to school, this time graduating from Portland State University in 1987 with a degree in speech communication.

"I never planned to become a writer—I always thought I would be involved in the arts," Beck reflects. "I thought writers had lonely lives and were lonely people."

He says he was wrong about that, convinced by his first assignment as a society columnist for the *Down-towner*. After that publication folded, he free-lanced for the *Oregonian* arts and culture section before joining *Willamette Week* as special sections editor in April 2000.

Beck embraced the newspaper's alternative style and immediately proposed a queer column, one with a personality that could address gay topics not talked about in mainstream media.

"It's not just about being able to say the 'f' word," he explains. "It's about being able to not think about it. To be able to write in your own style and to write honestly about how you feel about things."

But when Beck threw open his "Queer Window" in June 2000, he not only faced a straighter-than-expected audience, he also felt pressure to reflect the entire spectrum of Portland's sexual minorities. He quickly learned he couldn't be a voice for the whole community.

For example, his frank but politically incor-

rect commentary on transsexual Damon Woodcock's battle with the Portland Police Bureau elicited a barrage of critical feedback. Many took issue with his perception of the trans community, describing his remarks as bigoted.

Of the stance he takes with his public voice, Beck contends: "You can't help being brought up with the prejudices that you were brought up with. You can't help having the beliefs that you have. Just because you're gay [doesn't mean] you're not still yourself. I got past the point where [the column] was like a big party, and it became a conversation—one that's been a long time in coming."

And Beck won't shy away should the conversation be other than a pleasant parley.

He says: "If I worry about trying to please the community, I'm doing a disservice to myself. As long as I stay true to myself and I believe what I'm saying, I haven't much of a problem with it. I willingly admit that I make mistakes. I'm wrong sometimes about how I feel, but at least that's how I really feel—I'm not trying to project something I don't believe" for the sake of solidarity.

After years of trying to fit in, Beck today accepts his individuality and independence, even when they run counter to prevailing public opinion. "There's a freedom in having to think about and process your ideas about yourself and your culture," Beck elaborates.

—Byron Beck

And what of gay life in Portland? Beck finds it all a paradox. Open, but hidden, for example, lacking strong community leaders, role models and even gay activists. Community building is no longer a priority, he warns, while at the same time resisting such a mantle for himself.

"Portland is a great city to live in, and it's a great city to be gay in, but that makes it really easy not to do the work that we probably should be doing," advises Beck, suggesting the community be more open to change and dissenting opinions.

Regardless of any influence his writing might have, Beck is proud that the column spurs an open dialogue. "All it is," he reckons, "is a window into a culture from my perception." □

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PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS