

Klamath Falls is not known for being the most gay-friendly place in Oregon. But 20-year-old Jared Hargrove is heading up a project that will take his hometown one step closer to being just that.

Along with Jeff London, 34, and Jeff Foster, 22, he is developing the Klamath Pride Organization to offer friendly social interaction, outreach and support to the local gay community. A wide variety of activities is already in the works for the group, including movie nights, potlucks, a Halloween party, a World AIDS Day candlelight vigil and Christmas-time sledding. "Klamath Falls needs an organization that can provide activities, support and unity [for] everyone, no matter what their sexual orientation or age is," Hargrove says.

All of the founders agree that the gay population in Klamath Falls is likely much larger than it seems. "I don't think there's ever going to be an accurate estimate," Foster says. "It's hard to get us all together. Nobody really wants to take a risk in a community of cowboys, farmers and gangster wannabes."

But the men also agree that Klamath's reputation for being homophobic isn't entirely accurate, either. "I haven't found that to be the case at all," Foster says, "and I've lived here my whole life."

Each Klamath Pride organizer has a compelling story to tell. Hargrove says he didn't experience any homophobia after coming out—except from his own family. His father kicked him out of his 87-year-old great-grandmother's house after he had taken care of her for a year. His mother told him he was going to hell.

"None of my family talks to me now," Hargrove says. "And this all happened about a year and a half ago."



Jeff London (left) and Jared Hargrove say Klamath Falls is more open-minded than most people realize

London came out to his mother at the age of 20. "She was concerned that I may go to hell," he says.

But after attending a church meeting where she was asked to put herself in her son's shoes, she changed her mind. "Amazingly, it worked! She realized how difficult growing up gay must have been, and to this day we are best friends," London says. "I find it interesting that going to church is actually what changed her attitude."

Foster has had the strange experience of feeling more shunned by his queer peers than by his straight friends and family. "Most gay men in this town consider it an exclusive thing, like belonging to a country club or something like that, especially if you don't conform to their physical standards," he says. "When I first started trying to participate in the gay community, I was told by members of the youth group I joined

that I wasn't gay because I was overweight."

Hargrove's decision to create the organization was born from a complete lack of formal support for queer youth in K-Falls. "Before I came out, I really needed someone to talk to," he says. "I tried calling another group in town about twice a month and could never get a response. When I finally attended one of their functions, I realized that this town needed something better, something that would reach out to youth and adults" who were coming out.

Eventually, Foster would like to see Klamath Pride offer youth counseling and age-related support groups along with strictly social activities. "There have been similar groups in the past, but because of infighting one group is gone, and the last remaining group is dying a slow and terrible death," he says. "It's time to offer something else."

One might wonder why the three brave

SOUTHERN OREGON PRIDE

Gay men in Klamath Falls organize to offer friendly social interaction, outreach and support

by Sarah Leimert

advocates don't move to a progressive urban area. "Klamath has turned out to be a lot more open-minded than anyone expects," Foster says. "But I have wanted to move before, to a place where there would

be more to do. I haven't left yet because of my family and because of the very close rapport I have with my extensive network of friends."

London also is remaining in Klamath for his family, and Hargrove and his partner are staying put for financial reasons. "We are dedicated to this group," Hargrove says. "We hope to get it going and stay put in Klamath for at least another year."

The group plans to advertise itself via classified ads, fliers, brochures and posters. Oregon Institute of Technology has offered space for meetings and welcomes a gay and lesbian group to form on campus. Hargrove's goal is to reach out to queers in Klamath Falls, "and we hope by having these activities it will bring the gay community closer together." ■

The KLAMATH PRIDE ORGANIZATION will hold a Meet and Greet from 3 to 5 p.m. Oct. 5 in the Sunset Lounge at Oregon Institute of Technology, 3201 Campus Drive. For more information e-mail Klamathprideorg@msn.com or visit groups.msn.com/KlamathPrideOrganization.

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