

A BITTERSWEET VICTORY

Aylett Wright sees the lasting impact of Measure 9 in Bend schools
by Tom Stevenson

Lon Mabon might have failed two years ago to convince Oregon voters to pass Measure 9. Still, according to a bi Bend woman, a great deal of damage was done, at least in some areas of the state.

Aylett Wright, education and training coordinator for Planned Parenthood of the Columbia-Willamette Central Oregon Health Center, was approached about four years ago by a group of young people who wanted to move away from having individual gay-straight alliances in different schools and instead have one that was communitywide. Because her job includes various aspects of sexuality education, she agreed to get involved.

"We always had a lot of kids attending," she says. "I was able to write a small grant to support the group's activities for quite a while. We used money to take kids to training, publish a 'zine and resource guide the kids prepared, purchase wonderful resources for a library and participate in community gatherings. The members did great things for National Coming Out Day, National Day of Silence...all of which had many participants and were a great success."

But two years ago, when the Oregon Citizens Alliance pushed the Student Protection Act, Wright says she saw a dramatic change. School administrators and teachers who had been open and welcoming became distant and quietly withdrew because they were "afraid to show support."

"Measure 9 passed in Deschutes County, and I believe this was unbelievable and frightening to the kids who watched this happen," Wright says. "At that time I began to observe change in GSA attendance: The last couple of years we typically had three to six kids per meeting, sometimes more, sometimes none. All of these kids hear anti-gay rhetoric and name calling in the schools and communities, even from adults who work with them. Many have experienced some degree of harassment or violence but are afraid to ask for help. Lon Mabon has succeeded in some not-so-subtle ways."

This year, Wright says, no new students have stepped forward, and the other members have moved on. She has not lost hope, however, and has plans to revamp the program.

Wright is no stranger to feeling heat regarding her job. When she started working at Planned Parenthood, it just had opened the health center and met with strong resistance from some members of the community.

In her sexuality education work, Wright deals with people of all ages but takes great delight in working with kids. "I do programs for nearly all agencies and organizations serving high-risk youth," she says.

Wright finds that the kids in alternative programs "tend to receive a far more open and in-depth sex education than most in public schools in Oregon." Slowly, she is seeing the rewards from the hard work of everyone involved in Planned Parenthood.

"I am beginning to make inroads to the school districts and more mainstream programs, but it has truly been a challenge," she says. "Some folks are beginning to realize that our



Aylett Wright also serves as a board member of the Central Oregon Human Dignity Coalition

approach is respectful of nearly all community norms, including encouraging young people to abstain from intercourse until they know what they need to know and have made a thoughtful, well-informed decision."

Wright has a long background in working with the queer community. The formerly married mother of two sons says she got "radicalized" in the early 1980s while living in Missoula, Mont.

"I had two friends die in the first wave of the HIV pandemic," she says. "Still in school [at University of Montana], I began to study human sexuality and developed a philosophy about teaching and talking openly about it. I did an internship with the health department's HIV/AIDS program and began to do health education."

Wright eventually began training HIV educators for the state and in 1991 became education director for Planned Parenthood of Missoula. "I was able to go to groups and individuals of all kinds, colors, ages and orientations," she says. "I taught about contraception, STDs, HIV/AIDS and other topics around healthy, whole-person sexuality."

Wright's job eventually was downsized, so she went to work as a private contractor and consultant. But more importantly to her, she decided to stop drinking around that time. "I am a recovering alcoholic with 4 1/2 years of sobriety," she says.

This is also when her daughter-in-law told her about the Bend job. She applied, was interviewed by phone and was hired. It has been a perfect fit. Her work, especially with at-risk youth, has been extraordinarily rewarding.

"I was a high-risk kid," she says. "I survived and have gone on to do my sacred work. Maybe something I say one day will make a difference in the lives of one of these kids." □

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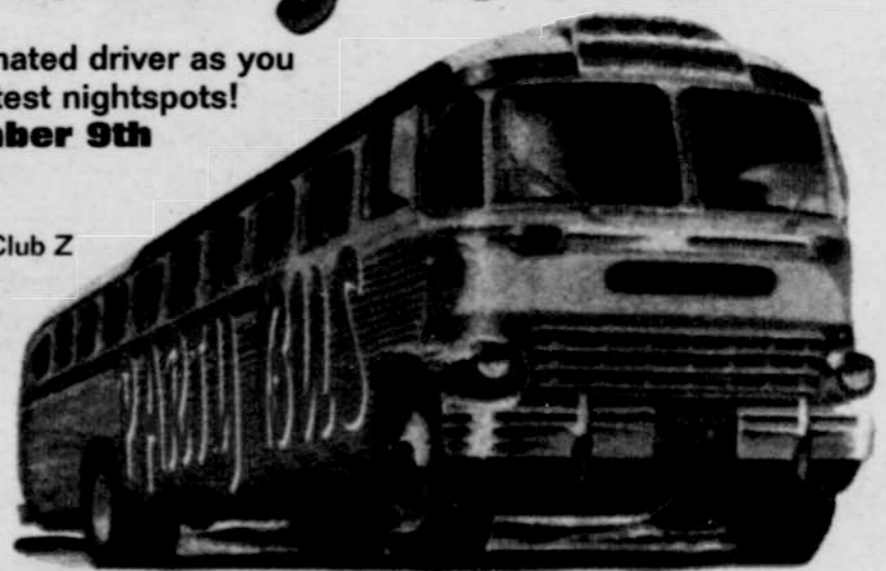
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