

The brutal murder of trans woman Loni Okaruru in 2001 was not Washington County's only hate crime in the past two years. There have been others where the victims were reluctant to come forward out of fear. In Hillsboro last year, shots reportedly were fired into the home of a lesbian couple; they left that night and moved out of the state.

These incidents were among the driving forces behind Patricia Keeney's decision to revitalize the Forest Grove chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. The continued political threat of the Oregon Citizens Alliance and her son's coming out collectively motivated her initial involvement with PFLAG nearly two decades ago.

The Forest Grove chapter has been around for 10 years. When it first began in 1993, only a handful of people were involved. Keeney remembers, "We had a few years of regular meetings, and it ended up dissolving because of other demands on the members."

Forest Grove is a conservative community, and the town elects representatives who are not gay-friendly. Keeney believes it isn't the safest place to be completely out of the closet. "We don't have a leader who speaks out in support of the gay community, so that sends a negative message."

PFLAG was a natural fit for Keeney, who says activism is a part of her makeup. When her son came out to her 19 years ago, she was completely ill-informed about homosexuality. Like so many parents, "all the information I had about gay people was wrong...so during his adolescent years, I was guilt-ridden," Keeney says.

Despite being a liberal activist, she admits she had the "same bias that other parents have toward their gay children." Gathering information was the key to understanding and accepting her gay son.

In her pursuit for enlightenment, a lesbian friend gave her Donald Clark's *Loving Someone Who's Gay*. "The book talked about parents of gays and lesbians. I had never thought about other parents of gays—of course there are parents of gays," she says with humorous delight. "I can't be the only one."

After reading the book, Keeney called a gay hot line in Portland and eventually talked to a PFLAG dad who was a doctor. "Within five minutes he had pretty much taken my guilt away," the Intel retiree says.

He explained that being gay is something people are born into and that it wasn't something she'd done. After realizing the importance of informing people about the truths of homosexuality, Keeney started attending regular PFLAG meetings.

"Because it hit me so personally, I became involved very quickly," she says. "Finding PFLAG changed my life in such a positive way."

Keeney not only boasts about the organization but also about the intense love she feels in

A DIFFERENT CUT OF HUMANITY

Forest Grove PFLAG gets a shot in the arm

by Gina Daggett

the room. "The family members that have put themselves out there to be informed are just a different cut of humanity," she says.

When they get together to march in support of loved ones in the Pride parade every year, "it is an overwhelming experience. It just reinforces the importance of being a parent who is out there, visible, positive and advocating."

Keeney believes a lot of parents think that because they are OK with the gay thing, that is enough. She challenges them: "Those are the parents we need the most to keep our society moving forward."

Keeney has high hopes for the new Forest Grove PFLAG group, which has undergone a 100 percent turnover in membership since 1993. Because she's been doing it all on her own dime, the resources have been thin. "The Portland PFLAG has been great and sent me a lot of stuff."

Yet, she really wants to get the group, composed of half queers and half family and friends, off the ground. "I have a lot of plans," including more community education, a library of information and rounding up an active board. Even though the revitalized group has held only three monthly meetings so far, she's encouraged by the tremendous show of support. She's anxious for more parents to get involved.

Keeney says the range of emotion around the PFLAG experience is intense. "There is excitement and joy and the pleasure of being a part of this community, and then there is the extreme sadness and anger toward our society and our political structure that continues to be against us."

When Keeney noticed the queer youth groups forming in town—at the university and the high school—she knew it was time to give Forest Grove PFLAG a shot in the arm. She doesn't think being a queer in Washington County is easy, and the students *Just Out* spoke with agreed.

Chris Rosimo, an openly gay sophomore at Forest Grove High, says he really doesn't know many other queers in Washington County. At his school, out of 1,900 students, only two others are out of the closet; he knows of 30 or 40 who are closeted. Although administrators aren't opposed to homosexuality, he says, "they're not really gonna point it out...so, I suppose that is good and bad at the same time."

Rosimo feels like a token to other students

and that he's a "conduit to something they don't really understand." Yet, he worries that "his actions will give them the wrong perception of the gay community as a whole." PFLAG is the first step on a long road, and he believes Forest Grove needs a lot of work. "If I get involved and others get involved, we can open the community's eyes."

Brie Walle and Caine Francis, both freshmen at Pacific University, are a part of the Rainbow Submarine gay campus club, which Francis says "for some reason doesn't gain a lot of support from students." Francis, who grew up in Beaverton, thinks the atmosphere in his hometown is quite different than that in Forest Grove. "There seems to be a lack of knowledge here."

Walle, an out lesbian, sees "awareness like a spectrum: The closer you are to inner city, the more liberal and open-minded people are." She has experienced some harassment from passersby in Forest Grove. She says that she's comfortable on campus but that as soon as she steps off campus with her girlfriend, "it's very conservative, and we have to watch ourselves." Walle joined PFLAG to advocate for and educate those around her, which, in the end, will prevent harassment.

The Forest Grove PFLAG chapter is ready to tackle Washington County through support and outreach, which will raise necessary awareness of the queer community. Information must be shared with people who are "naïve about homosexuality," says Francis, using his mother as an example. "It



From top, Caine Francis, Patricia Keeney and Brie Walle hope to raise awareness of the sexual minorities community in Washington County

wasn't so much that she didn't like gay people; she didn't know anything about the community." ■

FOREST GROVE PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS meets 7 p.m. the third Tuesday of each month at Forest Grove United Church of Christ, 2032 College Way. For more information call 503-992-2293 or e-mail fgpflag@aatt.net.

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