

When former Portlander Renée Jacobs ran into Mónica Taher at a recent Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation event in California, they thought it would be a chance to catch up. Little did they know that catching up would take them all the way back to 1996 and a lawsuit against *The Oregonian*.

Taher, who until last month served as Western regional media manager for GLAAD, had the latest information on the media watchdog group's campaign to convince more newspapers to list same-sex commitment ceremonies, unions and weddings. At least 200 publications have agreed to carry the announcements.

"I said to Mónica: 'I've just got to know. Is *The Oregonian* one of the papers doing this now?'" Jacobs recalls. "Mónica started laughing and said yes and I said, 'Well, guess what?'"

Jacobs proceeded to tell the story of what happened seven years ago when two lesbians sued *The Oregonian* for not running their wedding announcement.

It was 1996 and same-sex marriage was a hot topic, especially in Hawaii, where the issue bounced between the courts and state Legislature. The Hawaiian situation made some states so nervous that they created laws recognizing only heterosexual marriages.

Then the feds jumped in with the Defense of Marriage Act. The pre-emptive national legislation defined marriage as between one man and one woman. It also allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

During the summer of 1996, Sandra Linebarier and Charlene Morris weren't trying to change legislation. They just wanted their

WEDDED BLISS

Attorney reflects on 1996 lawsuit against *The Oregonian* by Pat Young

wedding announcement printed in *The Oregonian*. After all, it was a free service offered to the community. They soon learned it was a service offered exclusively to the heterosexual community. When *The Oregonian* refused their request, they sued, saying the newspaper violated city and state laws prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations.

Representatives of the publication claimed the wedding announcements were news items and thus covered under the First Amendment. "Hiding behind the First Amendment protection was little cover for the fact that it really was blatant discrimination," says Jacobs, the attorney who represented Linebarier and Morris.

The judge agreed with *The Oregonian* and denied a preliminary injunction that would have forced the paper to run the announcement submitted by Linebarier and Morris. Joe D. Bailey, a Multnomah County district judge pro tem, wrote that there was a "rational basis" to have marriage defined as a heterosexual ceremony. However, he also wrote that "there is a rational basis for the meaning plaintiffs assign to 'wedding.'" Meanwhile, the couple's announcement ran in *The Tigard Times*.

Last year Taher called *The Oregonian* to get it to join the growing list of newspapers that included same-sex couples on wedding pages. GLAAD launched its Announcing Equity Project in the summer of 2002 with the news that

The New York Times would list same-sex ceremonies. "We thought that if *The New York Times* did it, then by default other papers would follow," Taher explains.

At *The Oregonian*, Taher talked to executive editor Peter Bhatia and editor Sandy Rowe. "They were not defensive, and they listened to me," she says. "I wanted to meet with them in person, but they said that wasn't necessary." Instead, Taher e-mailed to them a PowerPoint presentation similar to the one GLAAD used with *The New York Times*.

In late October, *The Oregonian* revealed it would revise its policy to include same-sex notices. Furthermore, all items would be treated as paid advertisements in a new section called "Celebrations" beginning Dec. 7, 2002.

Throughout the many phone calls and e-mails, no one at *The Oregonian* mentioned to Taher that the paper was sued in 1996. And she



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—Renée Jacobs

didn't find out until she caught up with Jacobs at the GLAAD event.

"When Mónica and I made the connection, tears welled up," Jacobs says. "It was just one of those moments of realizing that change was possible."

Jacobs adds, "When I finished with that lawsuit and moved to California, I did not think that I would see a change in that policy for decades, if at all."

So far, only one lesbian couple have placed an ad in the "Celebrations" section.

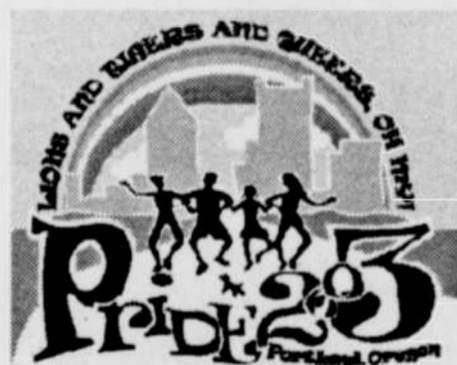
Mary McCarty and Lottie Zorn were not happy when their announcement appeared under the "Commitments" heading. The paper refused to rerun the ad under "Weddings."

"It wasn't a commitment," Zorn told *Just Out* in December. "It makes us sound like we

were committed to an insane asylum."

In addition to *The Oregonian*, several other Portland-area papers list same-sex ceremonies, including *The Beaverton Valley Times*, *The Tigard Times* and *The Tualatin Times*. Obviously, *Just Out* always has had an inclusive policy. ■

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.



pride: *n.*

1. feeling of honor and self-respect; sense of personal worth; satisfaction or pleasure taken in one's own or another's success and achievements.
2. time to reach out and come together as a community to celebrate!
3. an excellent marketing opportunity!

Just Out's Portland Pride 2003 issue hits the streets June 6.

*This year we are publishing, distributing and handling advertising for the program previously coordinated by Pride Northwest.

*This special section will include extensive coverage of honorees and entertainers appearing in the Rose City as well as details about planned Pride festivities throughout Oregon and Southwest Washington.

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