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NORTHWEST news

A PEACE OF THE WORLD

Sexual minorities help student exchange program promote respect for diversity by Timothy Krause

"If I could, I'd pass a law that every American would have to live abroad for a while—just to open up our heads," says Thomas Morgan, regional field team manager in Portland for American Field Services, one of the world's largest student foreign exchange programs.

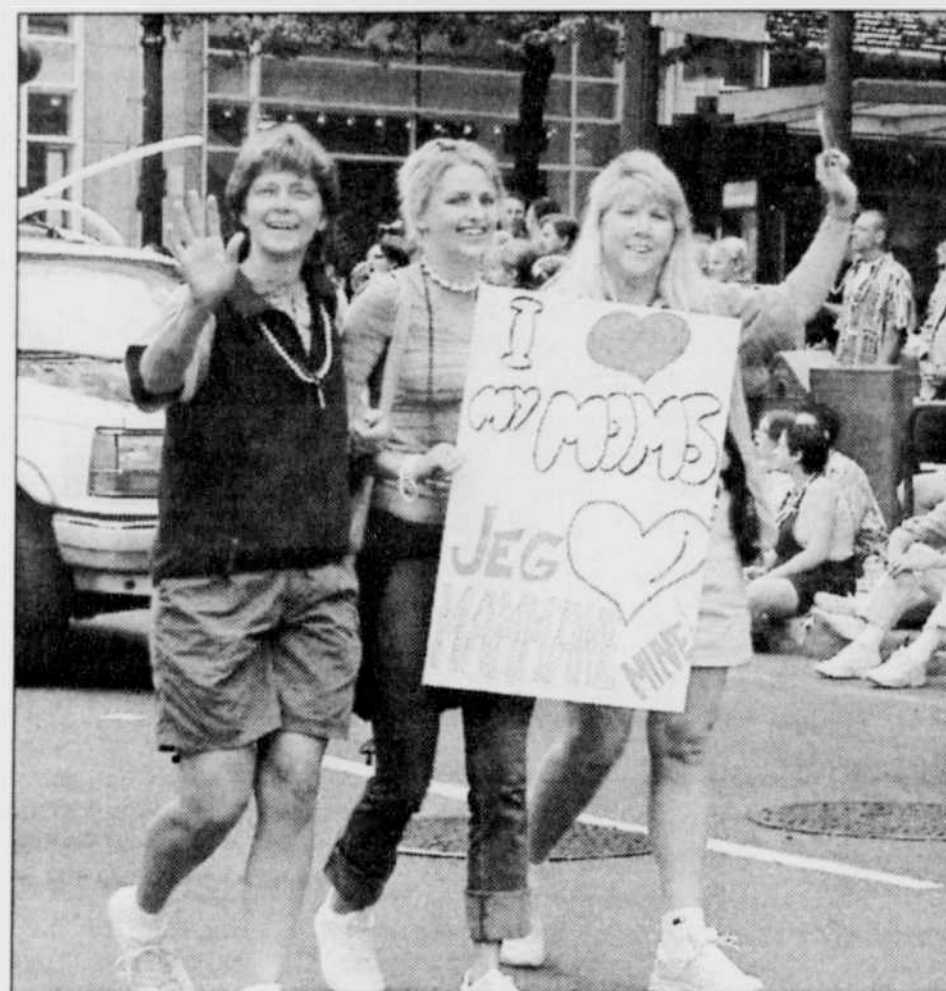
"I look around and I see the myopia and the ignorance of other cultures and even the ones that are here in the U.S. It's like somehow—and this is a generalization—the most we can pull from our multicultural society at times is stereotypes as opposed to a more profound understanding of how people live," discerns Morgan, who through AFS spent a year in Honduras during high school before coming out as a gay man.

That experience, he says, taught him not only acceptance of other cultures but also acceptance of himself.

With a mission to create a more just and peaceful world, AFS embraces core values of dignity, respect for differences, harmony, sensitivity and tolerance. The area chapter welcomes 50 students each year and sends the same number abroad; the nearly century-old program annually serves 10,000 worldwide.

In many places, that openly includes sexual minorities. But acceptance is far from universal, since the primarily volunteer program relies on approval of all parties (students, natural and host families, native and host offices) for placement within nontraditional families. Some countries, such as Japan, Brazil and Egypt, for example, tell U.S. representatives to not even bother asking.

Geoff Wren and David DeMoss experienced this frustration firsthand when their offers to take in students from Italy and Hungary were nixed by



Helene expresses bilingual adoration for her host family, Barbara Timper (left) and Wendy Jensen, during Portland Pride 2002

parents or native country representatives. Nevertheless, this gay couple opened the doors of their downtown Portland home to a half-dozen exchange students through the years. For most of those kids, having two dads was a non-issue. But when a straight student from Norway named Alex joined them in 1999, the comfort zone took longer to establish.

Despite Scandinavia's reputation for acceptance of sexual minorities, Alex hadn't known any gay people. In fact, Wren says, "He also told us that not so long before he came here that he was out with his friends beating up gays in a small town in Norway, [which is] an odd place with social liberalism and highly conservative culture."

Yet, exhibiting a characteristic typical of exchange students, Alex deliberately chose to stay with the gay couple in order to expand his horizons. Wren says Alex wanted to "break free from the repression or small-town mentality that he, at age 17, was conscious of having acquired."

In an e-mail, Alex writes: "My experience with Geoff and David was the most familylike situation

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