

Editor's note: By request of those interviewed for this story, names have been changed. Being gay in rural areas can still be somewhat frightening, and sources asked that their names be kept confidential.

For queers who live in rural areas, one of the greatest drawbacks can often be a lack of social connection. Where exactly are you supposed to meet other members of the sexual minorities community?

In Cowlitz County, Wash., a group of primarily gay men who live in Kalama, Woodland, Castle Rock and a number of other small towns have come up with a solution: a once-a-month social gathering that combines the old-fashioned idea of a "community potluck" with modern notions of networking.

The group, which meets on the second Saturday of each month at a private residence, includes mostly men, but its diversity is still impressive. Members range in age from 18 to 80. Some identify as gay, some bisexual, and some are married men. Some come to try to meet a sexual partner. Some are there simply to meet new friends. Some of those attending are out and are quite comfortable with their sexual orientation. Others are extremely closeted, and the only ones who know they are gay are those in the group.

Members are also there for networking purposes. The group serves as a "clearinghouse" of sorts in which the men help each other out by offering rooms for rent and hiring other members to do odd jobs. They offer each other tips and words of encouragement on how to respond to homophobia and how to come out. Most of all, the group simply serves as a place where those attending feel safe among like-minded individuals.

The group was started many years ago by Larry Wilson, who says the only people who came to the first event were "his straight neighbors." It has since grown to include a list of more than 50 people, with a normal crowd of between 25 and 30 attending each month.

"It is a potluck social," says Wilson, a single 65-year-old gay man. He adds that the group sometimes does other activities such as hiking.

Jack Cole, another member, is a single 59-year-old gay retired mill worker. He did not come out even to himself until later in life, after marrying a woman and fathering three children.

Cole's coming-out process has not been an easy one, and he is still not out completely. He says he married as a young man to please his family and church, which today he admits "is probably the worst thing a young gay man can do."

SAFE AND SOUND

Social group gives gay men a place to network in Cowlitz County, Wash. by Tom Stevenson



Between 25 and 30 men meet on the second Saturday of each month at a private residence in rural Washington state

"Because it is a small town, we have to contend with religious bigots. And that is frightening."

—Jack Cole

meeting other gay people but lived with a great deal of fear. He worked side by side with many people he knew had zero tolerance for gays and lesbians and in fact was aware that some even had violent feelings about the issue.

"You never know how people are going to react," Cole says, noting that even his three children are not sure how to treat him. Fortunately, he says the people who are completely out in Cowlitz County "have not had a great deal of problems."

Wilson is one of those who has come out and says it has not been as difficult as one

When he finally admitted to himself at the age of 40 that he was gay, he says he slowly started

might expect. "I haven't noticed any discrimination on my part. There has been no real harassment."

Wilson's humor comes alive when he talks about his early experiences as an out gay man. He reveals that oftentimes "those that harassed me the most were usually the ones I took home."

"Give someone a bottle of beer and everyone is gay," he says with a laugh.

Wilson says that when he finally came out to everyone, the only "friends" he lost were other gay men who were "afraid of being identified as being gay."

"Some people can't handle it," he says. "It can be pretty scary."

Cole also finds the obvious fears highlighted in another way. He says the group often encounters difficulty in getting people to play host to

the potlucks because they fear what the "neighbors might see."

Cole says one of the specific purposes of the group is to help younger members of the gay community find a "safe place" to socialize and meet others. He adds that the wide range in the ages of members "does not seem to be a problem at all."

"Young gays should be proud of who they are," Cole says. "We want to give them that chance. We need to educate the youth. We need to let the young gay people know that it is OK to be who they are," adding that he truly hopes young people won't have to deal with the same pressures he faced.

Getting the young people to attend the social events is not always easy. There is the common fear of being outed, but Wilson is brutally honest about another reason why young gay men tend to stay away from social events such as the one in Cowlitz County.

"The young people don't come as much as they should because older men hit on them," he says. "The fact is, young people like to be with young people."

That doesn't mean young people don't attend. Those who do find a close kinship in a nurturing environment. The social group gives them a chance to meet people who are willing to give them employment and a place to live if that is what is needed.

Still, there is a distinct fear that comes from being a gay person in a small rural community. Cole knows exactly how the young people feel as they are just beginning the process of identifying as queer.

"Because it is a small town, we have to contend with religious bigots," he says. "And that is frightening."

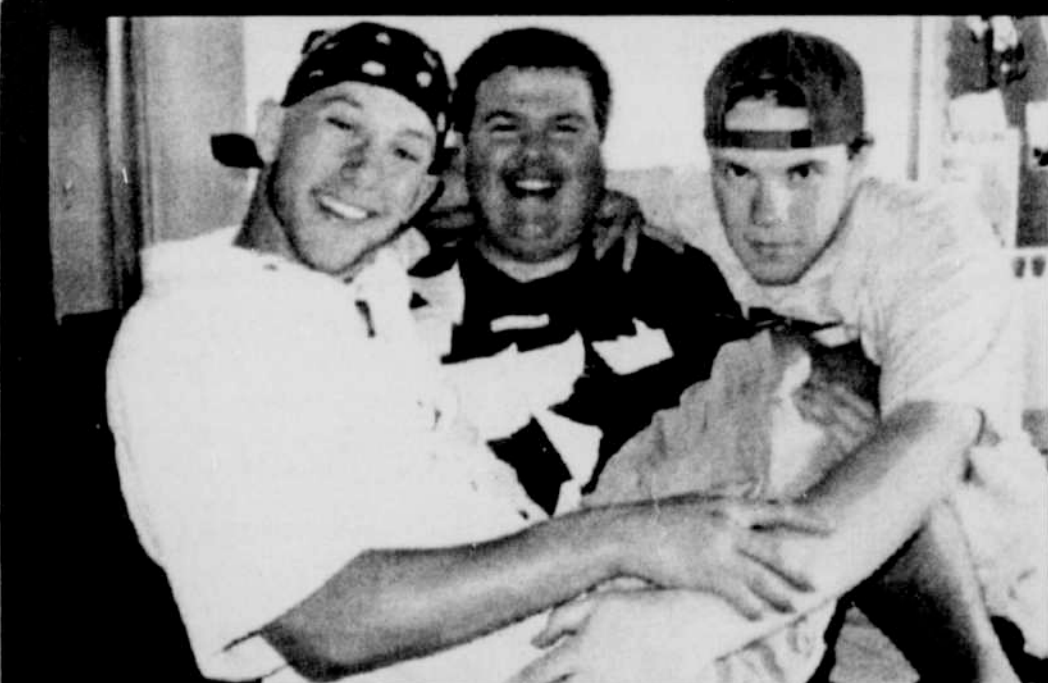
The Cowlitz County group also networks with other organizations in the region. Members recently traveled north to meet with members of a similar group of 50 men in Lewis County. The idea is that those types of meetings not only allow members an opportunity to meet new friends but also a chance to share thoughts.

"They face the same things we face," Cole says.

The Cowlitz County group always welcomes new members, and Cole says he hopes those people who are interested but not yet involved will take the time to seek them out. "It's nice to have a chance to meet with other men who know what you're going through." □

For more information about the COWLITZ COUNTY GAY MEN'S SOCIAL GROUP call 360-425-5969.

TOM STEVENSON is a Portland free-lance writer whose coming-out journey was helped along by a group in rural Oregon quite similar to the one in Cowlitz County. He can be reached at ruraltom@yahoo.com.



Dignity in Safe Schools

Your gift to Equity is an investment in dignity.

A Gay-Straight Alliance can make all the difference. That's why Equity Foundation is proud to be a sponsor of Safe Schools projects throughout the state, including at Madison High School in Portland.

Equity Foundation's Safe Schools Initiative assures that all youth have the opportunity to learn in an environment free of bullying and harassment. Make your contribution today so young people across Oregon can feel safer in their schools.

Founded in 1989 by Oregon's Gay and Lesbian community. www.equityfoundation.org
Ad sponsored by Marvin Salles, Realtor and Susan Nestor, CPA.

EQUITY
FOUNDATION
Investing in Dignity

PO Box 5696
Portland, OR
97228-5696
503-231-5759