

ENTER THE DRAGO

Keynote speaker provides visibility for deaf queers

by Eric Plemons

Bay Area-based trans activist and organizer Dragonsani "Drago" Renteria will deliver a keynote address at this year's Portland Pride celebration. As the first deaf keynoter in the history of Portland Pride, his address promises to provide some much-needed visibility for the deaf queer community.

The list of Drago's activist credentials is lengthy and impressive in its scope. His commitment to promoting knowledge, communication and resources about deafness within queer and genderqueer communities has fueled accomplishments toward this end for more than a decade.

In 1991, he published the first magazine by, for and about the deaf queer community as a way unite the community and provide a national voice. A resident of the Bay Area since 1989, he served as director of San Francisco's Deaf Gay and Lesbian Center from 1992 to 1995, working to raise awareness and increase the visibility of the deaf queer community.

In 1995, he founded the Deaf Queer Resource Center, a Web-based national information and resource clearinghouse that can be visited at www.deafqueer.org. In addition to providing resources and information by, for and about the deaf queer community, the center "has also provided peer counseling and given educational workshops and trainings across the country," Drago says.

Working toward its goal of providing services to the estimated 2.8 million deaf queer people in the United States, the center averages roughly 10,000 visits to its Web site each month and receives nearly 250 e-mails each day. Drago, who answers many e-mails personally, says the topics include "everything from hearing groups wanting to know how to use and where to find interpreters, to deaf queers living in small cities who need coming-out support."

Among the features available at the Deaf Queer Resource Center are deaf HIV/AIDS stories, e-mail directories of deaf queers around the country, a popular online chat room, coming-out stories and links to more than 30 deaf queer organizations in the United States.

Portland Pride board member and American Sign Language teacher Jeska Duckworth is excited about the opportunities for inclusion and understanding that Drago's visit will bring.

"The Pride board chose Drago to deliver a keynote address this year because we realize the local deaf queer community is a growing part of the larger community," she says. "His presence at Portland Pride this year will provide visibility for the deaf queer community and educate the hearing queer community that deaf queers can be involved and are a vital part of our community."

Ongoing local efforts toward integrating deaf and hearing queer circles have been orchestrated by Deaf & Hearing OUT Reach, a Portland nonprofit organization dedicated to building community among deaf and hearing queers and allies. Recent events—open to all interested in



Dragonsani "Drago" Renteria founded the Deaf Queer Resource Center and the National Deaf Queer Archives

attending—have included Queer Deaf & Hearing Coffee Nights hosted by Haven coffeehouse in Southeast Portland as well as a Deaf Queer Comedy Night.

As an active member of the deaf queer community in Portland, Duckworth recognizes the value of Drago's work. "Drago's activism is important to the Portland queer community because he has been on the forefront as a leader for the trans and deaf communities," she says.

In addition to the work he does within the groups he has organized and founded, Drago is also actively involved with Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, FTM International and the Youth Gender Project.

He is also passionate about preserving deaf queer history, which is often overlooked and absent from most deaf and queer history books. In 1994, he founded the National Deaf Queer Archives, which he continues to maintain and coordinate on a volunteer basis.

After dedicating most of his life to the non-profit sector, Drago now acts as CEO of DeafVision, a new media company that provides Web hosting, design and programming services. Though DeafVision's clientele is diverse, representing a variety of business fields and interests, the company does a great deal of work helping deaf, deaf queer and trans organizations establish a presence online.

Drago's work has helped establish a presence of deaf folks within queer communities, and that work will continue in the Rose City during Pride 2004. Portlanders are certainly fortunate to have an organizer with his tenacity and drive as a guest during our recognition of the diversity and uniqueness that makes queer culture something to celebrate. **J**

DRAGO will deliver his keynote speech 2:45 p.m. June 20 at Waterfront Park. For more information about Deaf & Hearing OUT Reach call 503-231-0921 TTY or 503-235-0840 voice, e-mail dh@deafvision.net or visit www.deafvision.net/dhor.

ERIC PLEMONS is a Portland free-lance writer.

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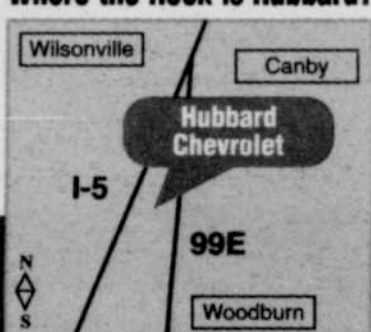
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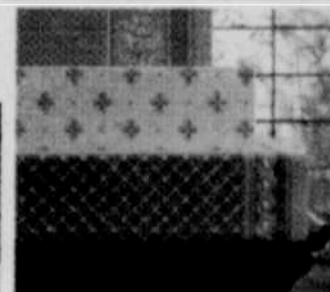


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