

The reflex

Ill-conceived reactionary behavior gets us nowhere

Much ado about nothing, or yet another sign that the right-wing conservative backlash is picking up steam and headed directly toward our camp?

The most recent "controversy," one so far-reaching as to receive coverage in *The Washington Post*, started with a conference being held later this month in Portland that's sponsored by the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. A panel of local leaders and experts in suicide prevention were scheduled to conduct a workshop titled "Suicide Prevention Among Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender Individuals."

The communication breakdown began when the panel was advised that the name of the workshop must be changed to remove specific references to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks. And this is the where the proverbial shit hit the fan.

Feeling rebuffed and sensing discrimination by the conference organizers, the local workshop presenters aired their grievance to media and the community at large. Their initial statement, widely distributed via the Internet, stated, "The discriminatory and intimidating actions of SAMHSA and the Bush administration should not go unchallenged and should be of concern to all Americans."

Presenters Ron Bloodworth, Joyce Liljeholm and Reid Vanderburgh are extremely dedicated to their task and to the community they serve. It simply did not sit right with them that the workshop title was being changed, and in these sensitive post-election times, they rose to do battle. Even the usually staid and aloof Human Rights Campaign entered the fray by issuing a statement calling for an investigation of recent allegations of censorship at a federally funded suicide prevention conference.

Conference organizers explained that they simply wanted the workshops to be more inclusive and that the name suggestion was initially proposed as only one of many suggestions. It's not difficult to see how easily misunderstandings and hurt feelings arose.

It's how these misunderstandings were addressed that has become troublesome. Portlanders opened their e-mailboxes and reacted swiftly to what appeared to be yet another attack against the gay, lesbian, bi and trans community. And the counterattacks began.

The story then shifted to, unfortunately, nationwide reports that organizers of the conference received rude, scathing and possibly threatening e-mails denouncing their actions regarding the retitling of the workshop. As reported in the *Post*, SAMHSA administrator Charles Curie "is getting e-mails calling him a Nazi. It is disgraceful the hate that these people have sent to him."

"These people," folks, are us. And I'm sorry to say I don't think we handled this very well.

Lashing out in anger, especially when hidden in anonymity, is seldom effective. People were reacting to information that was either missing or incorrect. Yes, it's important to care, it's important to take action, but it's even more vital to be educated and to be informed—to know your facts and not be caught in a wave of ill-conceived and inappropriate reactionary behavior.

The story ended with the workshop title being changed to "Suicide

Prevention in Vulnerable Populations." The local presenters stepped up and brought an end to the electronic hostilities by acknowledging that there had been misunderstandings and miscommunications. They issued a statement that read: "At this time we are pleased to go ahead with the workshop. SAMHSA still has a policy of using the term sexual orientation to refer to all GLBT community members, and it is our goal to educate SAMHSA and to work toward changing that policy. We hope to educate SAMHSA to understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. We are saddened that there were messages of personal attack sent to SAMHSA in response to our statement of concern. We appreciate all the positive, constructive messages that were sent on our behalf to Sen. [Gordon] Smith and to SAMHSA. We regret that they were based partially on some miscommunication but hope that some increased understanding of GLBT issues will still result."

I was happy to receive the winter Lesbian Community Project newsletter, *OnTrack*. LCP has maintained a low profile of late, and I'm pleased to see that the organization is alive and kicking and working on plans and activities for 2005.

Board members Alyson Bolles, Debbie Caselton, Maureen Duncan, Lyra Hall, Donna Lockett and Dory Rowe are to be commended for putting time and energy into keeping this organization viable. As much of our collective time and resources seem to be focused, perhaps too narrowly, on the struggle for marriage equality, it's important that we pay attention to the organizations that have long sustained and constitute the very essence and infrastructure of our community.

Yes, marriage and its associated legal rights are crucial, but there's much more than that to our everyday lives. People still come out daily and struggle with acceptance and life changes. People still have social and emotional needs, and people still need LCP and similar organizations. While looking to the future, let's not lose sight of the past.

Finally, lesbians were everywhere on television the past few days.

Some moments painful, some puzzling and one stunningly proud.

Painful and puzzling was a bizarre episode of the ABC reality show *Wife Swap* in which a lesbian mom traded households with a conservative Republican wealthy mixed-race Texas household. Damn, that woman was mean. And the point of this was—?

The next night on *ER*, lesbian Kerry Weaver was finally reunited with her long-lost birth mother, only to be soundly rejected and cast aside because of her sexuality. Good lessons, I'm sure. I'm just wondering for whom they're intended.

The proud and powerful moment of victory goes to Melissa Etheridge and her stunning performance of Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" at the Grammys. In the words of *Just Out* News Editor Sarah Dougher, herself a breast cancer survivor, "Her shiny, beautiful bald head let women with cancer everywhere know they are not alone in their struggle and that life continues powerfully after diagnosis and treatment."

Amen, sister. ☐

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The fight for equal protection is nothing new to mixed-race families

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16-19 NATIONAL

AIDS in the developing world; New York City judge orders gay marriage; Bush on gay adoption; extreme right-wing judges renominated

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REFLECTIONS

• Portland attorney Cynthia Cumfer recently published a handy guide for living together. *Living Our Lives: Living Together Agreements for Lesbian, Gay and Unmarried Couples in Oregon* is a 58-page manual with sample agreements covering subjects such as owning property completely separately, owning property completely jointly and owning property separately with exceptions.

• Bedbugs and mosquitoes don't spread HIV from one person to another, conclude scientists at the Centers for Disease Control. After eating blood that was loaded with HIV, these bugs did not become infected with HIV. The scientists also injected HIV directly into the bugs, but HIV did not multiply or live for more than a few hours within the bugs.

• Jan Corwin and Kip M. Hard of Circle Chiropractic; Valerie M. Lyon and Kathy Peters of Neighborhood Massage Clinic; naturopathic physician Suzanne Scopes; and acupuncturist Brooke Winter are pleased to announce that they are joined together to create Circle Healthcare Clinic.

• Despite what you may personally think of the City Nightclub and its controversial owner, Lanny Swerdlow, we should all be outraged that the city is considering shutting down the teen-age gay nightspot under Portland's so-called Drug House Ordinance.

• The Weyerhaeuser Company's in-house health publication *HealthWise* claims that "gunshot wounds, stabbings, drug overdoses and AIDS patients" are taxing the resources of today's public and private hospital emergency rooms nationwide.

• Assaults against gay men cruising Laurelhurst Park and Lents Park represent an ongoing problem, and an overworked police department does not have the resources to serve and protect everybody. The advice from the police department for gay men is, simply, discretion.

• A task force that aims to boost resources and support for gay, lesbian and bisexual teen-agers has earned a tentative go-ahead from Portland Public Schools Superintendent Matthew Prophet. While not making any commitments to specific ideas such as holding sensitivity trainings for staff or adding sexual orientation to the school's nondiscrimination code, he did encourage the task force to continue its work.

• First Tuesday Coffeehouse with Carol Steinel presents "Know Water" with Cathryn Heron, Elissa Goldberg and Meg Rowe. Also performing are Susan Aarow, Ali Adleman and Denise Howard.



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