

CULTURE

# Growl play

Portland's BearTown 2005 group hug

BY THERESA "DARKLADY" REED

After the Rose Festival crowns its new queen and before the streets are filled with Pride flags and festive events, Portland will open its arms in a bear hug big enough to include otters, wolves, cubs, grizzlies, polar bears, daddy bears and all manner of other hairy, furry, brawny, hefty, husky and full-bodied gay men, women, trans folk and their admirers. From June 9 to 12, the City of Roses will once again be known as BearTown.

During these four days, visitors from as far away as the United Kingdom will converge on Portland to celebrate a decade of Oregon Bear history and community—as well as select the 2005 Oregon Bear and Oregon Cub title-holders. Along the way, bears and bear lovers will crawl beneath the city, prowl through the Chinese Garden and Saturday Market, dance

drawn to the bear community.

"Of course it's easy to stereotype," he confesses, "but what I experience is a willingness to go beyond looks and lookism. That's not to say that we don't look for handsome guys, but it is the willingness to be inclusive and accepting. I think that members of the bear community are a bit more down to earth in their dealings with each other, a little more honest, a little more accepting, more sexual without hang-ups."

Acceptance and inclusion are especially important to bears, whose perception of sexuality was marginalized within the greater gay community for many years. When the bear movement emerged during the 1980s, its members vowed to provide one another with support and camaraderie. In fact, bears often seem to go the extra mile in order to be inclusive

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—Richard Wilde



Oregon Bears came out of hibernation for Portland Pride 2003.

cheek to jowl during the Double X Dance, growl in admiration at bear film performer Clint Taylor, raise money for charity and share ample belly laughs during the Skyline Dinner Above BearTown courtesy of lesbian host Shann Carr. And that's just the beginning.

Prior to 1995, the organized social opportunities for admirers of the fully fleshed, blue-collar, working-class physique and its laid-back attitude were limited. Yet today, the Convention Center Red Lion Inn is booked solid with attendees, and overflow hotel The Jupiter is packing them in. The event, called Beards & Roses until its more inclusive name change in 2003, is a model for other clubs to emulate, as is the city's famous atmosphere of welcome and sense of family warmth.

Oregon's history of logging- and timber-related industry professions makes it a natural for those seeking the fellowship to be found during BearTown and at the Oregon Bears' many other activities and events. Unlike Southern California's celebration of sleek, hairless youth, the Pacific Northwest has understood the real-world value of a man disheveled from hard work, damp with honest perspiration, intentionally unshorn and robust with life.

For many members, the existence of bear culture has been a dream come true. Oregon Bears board member Richard Wilde speaks for many when he observes that he had long sought the companionship of the type of men

and supportive—with the Oregon Bears going perhaps even a bit further. According to former club president Doug Watson, "As a bear friend from Seattle said during a previous BearTown: 'You don't have a bear club. You have a bear family.'"

The Oregon Bear family hosts regular parties and Bear Busts at Portland establishments, including the Dirty Duck, as well as nonbar-related events such as Camp Oregon Bears, Bear & Cub Softball, UnderBear Bowling, brunches, dinners, movie nights—and fundraisers. The success of the Oregon Bears in its mission not only to its own members but its outreach to other communities was recognized this year with All City Awards presented for Organization of the Year. The group's Teddy Bear Holiday Drive & Review likewise took home an award for Charitable Event of the Year.

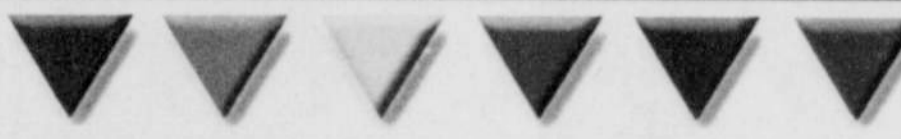
No wonder board member at large Earl Case Jr. says, "I'm proud to be a bear and wouldn't give it up for anything." ☐

To register for BEARTOWN 2005 visit [www.oregonbears.org](http://www.oregonbears.org).

THERESA "DARKLADY" REED is a full-time sex writer and event coordinator as well as Ms. Oregon State Leather 2004. You can learn more about her plans for world conquest at [www.darklady.com](http://www.darklady.com).

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