

BACK ROADS OF COURAGE, *Backwaters of Fear*

Finding
pride in rural
Oregon

Story and photos
by Sarah Dougher

For the editor at a gay newspaper, June is a convulsion of Pride. The parade, the festival grounds, the bars, the alcohol swirl and blur through the weekend, spitting us out at the end and leaving us very much where we started. The Pride celebration feels very urban, because it is in urban places that queers have found one another, and found a mass large enough to (momentarily) fend off bigotry and violence. We have a sense of security living in the city, that we will be safe here, together.

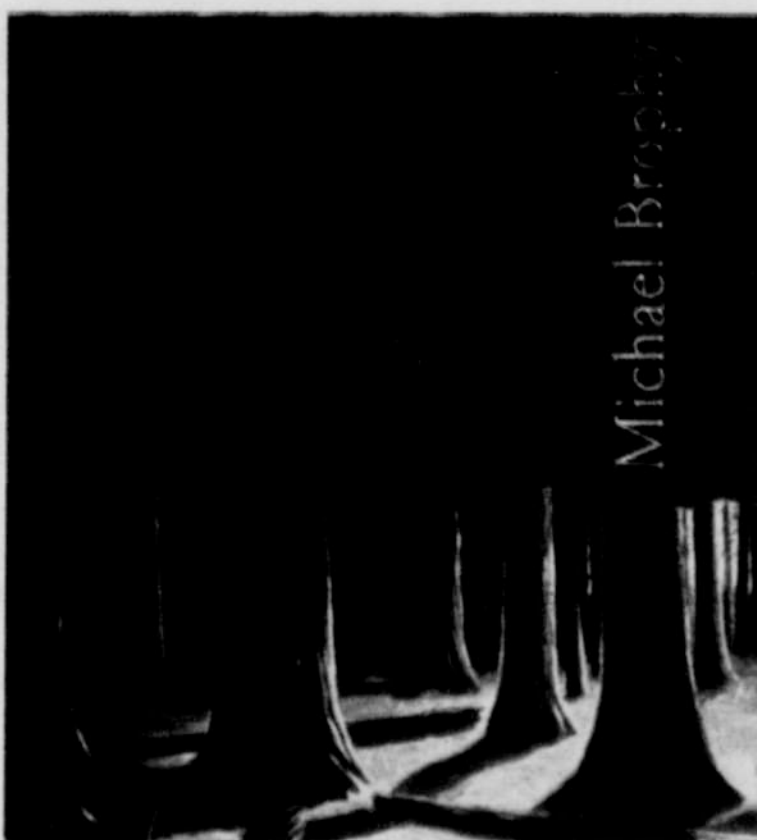
For this year's Pride issue, *Just Out* decided to take a new direction by focusing our coverage on queers living outside the Portland metro area. We wanted to know how and why queer people decide to live in the country and small towns. We wanted to know about the challenges they encounter and the triumphs they celebrate. At the same time I was touring the state in early June, Senate Bill 1000 was summarily ripped asunder, so its integrated demands of civil rights and civil unions were parted, leaving civil unions to face an uncertain fate in the Senate as SB 1073. This and other legislation affects all Oregonians, and this is in part why for Pride, I went statewide.

SETTING OFF: INTO THE WOODS

It is late on June 1. I look out the window of the Crystal Ballroom down onto Burnside, and to Stark Street beyond. People are weaving their ways through the paths of the Portland night, and behind me about 500 queers, plus 500 others, are screaming for an encore as local indie-rock heroines Sleater-Kinney re-emerge onto the stage. Their new album is called *The Woods*.

Their show is a sonic tangle with periodic thickets of melody. It is difficult, physically challenging and at times desolate. The album cover features an adaptation of a painting by Portland artist Michael Brophy, whose landscapes explore the relationship between the natural and built environments, and the iconic features of Northwest history and culture.

Just as Brophy's paintings take the viewer into scenes of unresolved conflict (the logger and the land, the native and the colonizer), the music surrounding me and the scene before me present startling contrast. Even in this most urban of environments, it is the woods that the band sings for, and conjures, and the wildness of the



Cover of *Michael Brophy Paintings/Essay Charles D'Ambrosio*. Courtesy of www.clearcutpress.com.



From left, Liz Cahill, Diane Groff, Michelle Snyder and Heidi Thorstad walk in the field behind the home that Cahill and Groff share.

woods is what the queers long for. There seem to be collective questions surging through the crowd: Where can I go to feel free? Where can I go to lose myself? Where can I go to get the respect I demand and deserve? Is it here? Is it in the wilderness?

As I left the Willamette Valley and headed up the Columbia River Gorge early on a Sunday morning in June, the pelting rain gave way to broken cloud cover and the rocky, dry landscapes of the eastern Gorge. The woods were behind me, but a far more complex landscape loomed ahead.

THE TEACHERS

I was traveling toward Milton-Freewater, or rather to a place outside Milton-Freewater, to the home of Liz Cahill and Diane Groff.

I first encountered Cahill and Groff in Salem, when they had both taken their only remaining leave day from