

work as high school teachers to testify on behalf of Senate Bill 1000. I was impressed by their poise, their common-sense approach to argument and their steadfast integrity. Their testimony was compelling because they spoke with honesty about the challenges they faced as schoolteachers in a rural, isolated community and the alliances they had built with colleagues, administrators and neighbors in the area.

Groff was the first to make inroads at MacLoughlin ("Mac") High, a rural school in Milton-Freewater with a student population of around 450 and a staff of around 55. She was at the school for seven years before Cahill came along, teaching science and living as an out lesbian the entire time. She is in her 19th year of teaching.

She was born and raised in Walla Walla, Wash., about 50 miles north of where she now lives. The couple are surrounded by family, with Cahill's parents right next door and 22 nieces and nephews in the nearby communities.

They live up a long country road that follows the twists of the wheat fields, then ambles along the side of a small river. On the way there I had to slow and let a wild turkey cross in front of my car.

Cahill and Groff had invited their friends, Michelle Snyder and Heidi Thorstad, over to have lunch with me and talk about their lives in the country.

Snyder and Thorstad were both raised in small towns (Lewiston, Mont., and Cannon Falls, Minn., respectively) and met when they were getting their teaching certificates in Billings, Mont. They both teach at Mac High as well.

Groff served on the hiring committee that initially brought Snyder to the school. She remembers thinking, "If that woman's not a lesbian, I'll cut off my arm." She was spared amputation, and the four women all grew to be great friends.

"We had originally thought of staying for just two years," reports Snyder, but then they decided to remain for the duration. "We like the small-town life. It is harder to find gay people here; most people are closeted. So there is a lack of support for what you would call a gay community. But we have a support system here that feels like our family."

All the women around the lunch table credit the supportive administration at their school for making their professional lives not just bearable, but enjoyable.



Cahill and Groff pose for a family portrait with the dog and the rainbow flag.

"Our kids know we are lesbians, that we are a couple," comments Thorstad. "And our administration is proactive with shutting down hate directed our way. They don't just put out fires."

Snyder and Thorstad live up the road in Athena. They acknowledge that everyone in town knows who they are but sometimes have a hard time keeping them apart. They are simply "the lesbians."

"If you get lost on the way to our house, you just have to ask where the lesbians live," reports Snyder. This lack of distinction, although essentially dehumanizing to the women, is better to them than outright hatred.

"Everybody's very nice; no one has ever been rude. Sometimes people stare and point, but I've gotten used to that," says Snyder.

"Everything social we do is in the straight world. There are no gay bars out here," she adds. "I don't really adjust my life in any way because I live out here. The only time I feel afraid is when I'm in big cities."

Thorstad adds that she does miss the theater. But the tradeoff for the sense of community and familiarity of a small town win out for her.

When Multnomah County started issuing marriage licenses, the four women were on the road to Portland as the sun was rising March 3, 2004.

"The day we went to get married was one of the most spectacular days of my life," says Snyder. She and Thorstad exchanged rings at Lloyd Center, then they all went to Edgefield Winery to celebrate on the way home.

When they got home, they had a party with their friends and neighbors, their boss, other teachers, secretaries—everyone was supportive.

When the marriages were annulled, there was an outpouring of emotion from kids at the school where the women teach.

"They understand what marriage is. It is hard that I can't say that anymore. When they got struck down, the kids hugged us and told us how sorry they were. They latched onto it. Now they call Michelle my 'ex-wife,'" reports Thorstad, laughing.

What, then, are the downsides to living in a rural community? As far as these women are concerned, there aren't many, and they generally stem from about a half-dozen families from the Baptist church who challenge

them every step of the way. Last year they wrote anonymous letters to the school administration accusing the women of preferential teaching and pushing the homosexual agenda.

"During the No on 36 campaign, it was particularly bad," notes Cahill. "Every day parents would march into the school office demanding our resignation because we were wearing No on 36 buttons. It affected every aspect of our life for months. It was my mistake to associate the silence with acceptance."

Groff notes: "I've had kids pulled out of my class because I'm gay. I have some kids who have a 'Straight Pride' shirt for every day of the week."

When Snyder took on adding domestic partnership benefits to local teacher union contracts, with language from the Oregon Education Association, five people wanted to withdraw from the union. Eventually only three did.

"I couldn't have done what I did without Diane," Snyder says. "Ninety percent of the work has been done by Diane being out and staying around for as long as she has. She deserves the credit."

As I leave the women to an afternoon of naps, biking and walking the dogs, I realize they work together to keep each other happy and supported. In what appeared to be a wilderness to me, I found some of the most civil people I had ever met.

MAKING A GO OF IT IN BEND

I head out over the wheat fields of Gilliam and Wheeler counties, the hills swelling and falling in the fading light of the day. Across the wide sky I can see the Blue Mountains, and a storm moving across the sky like a black column. As evening approaches, I reach the top of a hill, and below see a sprawl of civilization. The landscape has changed to a high desert scrub, with the strong sage smell in the air.

Bend is one of the fastest-growing cities in the Western United States. The population is around 65,000. The sprawl between the city center and neighboring Redmond lasts for miles: payday check-cashing joints, pawn shops and Wal-Marts, mixed with the intermittent aboriginal chain saw sculptor and the unceasing legion of drive-through coffee emporia.

Derek Hanna moved from Phoenix to Bend two months ago to start a business with his brother. They run a low-cost legal documentation service called We the People.

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