

to eventually find a position in a rural setting.

"These are the kids that need us," he says. "That's where I think I could do the most good."

He has become active in the community since his arrival here, and credits it for re-energizing his spirit of activism: "I've got to be loud again," he says.

All the people gathered around the table are looking forward to the Southern Oregon Pride celebration, which has events scheduled throughout this month. The community center is playing host to a number of events; volunteer coordinator and board member Leslie Sadur notes that since the organization began, there has been outstanding local media and business support.

Sadur, a retired banker, moved to Ashland two years ago from Miami with her longtime partner. They had heard that Ashland was relatively tolerant, but also offered a small-town congeniality. Sadur works tirelessly for the center and at many times during lunch is credited by the others for keeping it up and running: "She is a support person for all the activists in town," notes Mancuso.

Although the assembled group sees conservative Christians as the hotbed of right-wing action in the area, they are all quick to credit the communities of faith that have built bridges with the queer community. In a town the size of Ashland, this takes guts. The United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, the Unitarians and the synagogue Enek Shalom have all contributed to the queer community in a variety of ways, from hosting gay-straight community dances to giving money to the community center.

Although Ashland is not the mecca of queer activism it once was at the height of the women's land movement and before AIDS, it is a place where people feel the effects of their own visibility on a daily basis. Their lack of fear encourages and motivates others to resist bigotry and hatred.

THEATER OF THE LIVING:

Connect the Dots and the Green Room

There are no Gay Straight Alliances in Grants Pass. But there is the Green Room. When I walk in, the cafe is filled with young people drinking coffee, talking and playing games. About as wholesome as you could hope for, given that most of them, from outward appearances, look pretty punk. Or gay. Or whatever. I try to reserve my totally biased city judgment for one minute while I seek out the people who run this place.

Shane Skinner and Tony James meet me, and I order a cup of coffee. Their boss, Connect the Dots Theatre

Company executive director James Pate, is out sick that day, but I've got the foot soldiers of the Grants Pass theater revolution right here.

Both men grew up in Grants Pass and, after a series of adventures, decided to return.

Skinner lived in a couple of different places, and when he came back he started working for the ubiquitous drive-through coffee chain, Dutch Brothers. It was in this unlikely hut that he met his first Radical Faeries, who invited him up to Wolf Creek Sanctuary.

After his time there, Skinner realized he needed to go back to Grants Pass and do good work: "I feel my presence needs to be here," he says. "I want to impact the community at large, and I feel that theater is a great way to talk to people in the community."

Part of Skinner's plan was realized when Connect the Dots put on *The Laramie Project* and held a series of community forums about the subject of the play, which is based on more than 200 interviews with people in Laramie, Wyo., following the death of Matthew Shepard.

Although these forums got people talking, it was not until the second staging of *The Vagina Monologues* that Connect the Dots really felt the heat of conservatism in its community. Although Skinner and James perceive an underground liberalism to the town, the production, which was meant to benefit the Women's Crisis Support Team, a local shelter, ended up creating such a commotion that there were letters to the editor in the local newspaper for a month and a half. The Right to Life organization of Josephine and Jackson counties wrote to the fiscal sponsors of Connect the Dots, and the theater ended up losing approximately \$40,000 in sponsorship revenues.

Both Skinner and James recognize that the old-money timber network that rules Grants Pass is not going to change easily, or with any speed.

"I went to school at the same place as my grandma," says James. "Grants Pass has been described as just like the '50s but with cable."

You may recognize Tony James' name and face if you are a drama fan from Portland. He lived in Portland and worked at the Northwest Children's Theater. He was awarded three Drammys for his work in various productions. He decided to move back to Grants Pass during a difficult time, and he met Skinner when they worked together in a production of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

"Grants Pass has changed a lot. Something's changing, and I'm not sure what it is," he says. He thinks that it might be people moving up from California and that if there are progressive people, they are staying pretty quiet.

"But I think this town is going to change for the better in the next five years," he says hopefully.

Now the men are scheming a production of

Cabaret, but first a drag ball to celebrate Pride.

Their little enclave of queer youth culture does not go unnoticed, and owners of a rival business have been calling the police daily, reporting the typical problems: sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, the later of which is the only vice present at the Green Room.

"Now that the cops know us, they've got our back," comments Skinner. But there is still the memory of when Wolf Creek was firebombed in the early '80s and no one did anything.

Things are changing in Grants Pass, and as I drove out of town, I knew I would be coming back again, either to catch a play or just get to know this small town underground a little better.

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Shane Skinner (left) and Tony James both grew up in Grants Pass, left and then came back.



From left, Tony James, Alexis Lombardo and Shane Skinner all do double duty in the office of Connect the Dots and behind the espresso machine at the Green Room.

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