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ROSEBURG: Mending Fences, Pushing Walls

Dancer Davis agreed to meet me after work in downtown Roseburg. She brought along 19-year-old Geoff Alexander, and we gathered in the office of Katie Hankins. Hankins and Davis are both social workers, and Alexander is a recent high school graduate from Myrtle Creek.

Alexander has been out since he was 13.

"People were really shocked. My parents were really shocked; they didn't know what to do. And word spread so fast," he says. Myrtle Creek has a population of approximately 3,500.

"Telling my parents and a couple friends was all it took, then everybody knew."

Was he scared? Did people provoke him?

"I was in eighth grade. I had a friend named Amy who had a reputation for beating people up. Anyone who flipped me any crap, she'd take care of it. It was pretty convenient."

"When I was first

coming out, people at school harassed me, but it stopped all of a sudden because I started taking action against it. Like once some kids squirted some fake blood on the back of my pants and I was really embarrassed. I went and told the office what was going on and said, 'I'm a human being, and I'm not going to take this kind of crap.' So they searched the lockers and found the people who did it, and the kid got suspended. I got tripped once, and the kid got expelled. Besides that, it's just been comments. The administration has been really supportive. I mean, I just brush it off if someone calls me fag or queer. I'm used to that. If I reported that, I'd been in the office all day long."

I was so moved by Alexander's ability to not only identify his own feelings and identity as an eighth-grader, but to stand up for himself with righteous anger

to the administration when he was harassed at school.

Thirteen years old and queer—there aren't so many resources for someone fitting this description in Myrtle Creek. So Alexander looked in the phone book and found the number for the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard. He talked to a man named Bill Russo, a stalwart of the Roseburg queer community, and the two have been friends since. He invited Alexander to potlucks, and even gave him a place to stay when things got rocky at home.

Both Davis and Alexander have been part of a queer youth outreach program that has recently come under fire from city commissioners. They host "Club Queer," a once-a-week drop-in evening with pizza and soda, sponsored by the Coalition for Sexual Minority Youth. But "Club Queer" sounds menacing to the commissioners, who have threatened to pull funding from some of the nonprofit organizations involved.

"One of them made statements about 'closing down the queer youth sex club that is being run by

adults,'" Davis says. "I mean, give me a break. All the negative publicity actually gave the coalition some momentum, and because it was under attack, a lot of middle-class liberals came out of the closet to support it. One of the commissioners actually suggested that instead of a group that celebrated queer kids, we should have a group that taught kids how to not act noticeable, so that they would not be harassed in the first place. That is so indicative of the prevailing attitude here."

Davis has exasperation in her voice when describing the conservatism of her community, but she is nonetheless an unapologetic and active citizen whose hope is expressed through her commitment to the progressive causes she fights for. Raised by Christian fundamentalists in Coos County, she came out at 18, spent 30 years in Humboldt County working as a court investigator, then moved to Roseburg with her partner. They have raised two boys, and live about a half-hour outside of town.

"I imagine that we choose to live in a rural commu-

nity for the same reasons anyone else chooses to live in a rural community. The lifestyle is really different. The values of the rural community are closer to the values of my heart. It's a double-edged thing, because as a gay person or lesbian, there might be a certain level of hostility toward you. But as a member of a rural community, there is a certain amount of acceptance. If you're an independent person, and you take care of yourself, and you watch out for your neighbors, and your neighbors look out for you, and if the fence goes down you work together to put it up."

Hankins moved to Roseburg eight years ago from Eastern Oregon. She went to school, and eventually found a place here. As a queer mother of a young child, though, she had a difficult time meeting people who understood her experience and could support her as a parent.

"As difficult as it is, you can build a community around you. It is easier to break down stereotypes in a small community when you get to know people one on one, and not as your sexuality, but just as a person. This is the first job I've been really out at, and I feel really fortunate that I can break down stereotypes people have of what a gay person is like."

Alexander concurs.

"For me, living in a small town, I have a lot of pride. Everyone around you is so bigoted and narrow-minded, and it feels like you are up against a brick wall. But I feel like with me being here, and being out and taking a role in activism, I can push that wall just a little bit. I can make a little bit of change. Maybe someone will come along after me and find that wall a little bit easier to push."

"When I walk down the street and people yell at me, it just gives me more passion and more incentive to fight these kinds of things and make things better in my area, to strengthen our gay community."

SALEM RAINBOW YOUTH

Across the riverfront park in Salem, I see that ubiquitous sign of homo celebration: the clutch of rainbow balloons. About 30 people had gathered on blankets and picnic benches. We were right on the edge of the Willamette River, and as the sun was setting, legions of bugs took up over the river and glowed as huge, undulating clouds in the late afternoon light.

I scanned the crowd for adults and picked out



Katie Hankins works at her desk at the Umpqua Community Action Network, a grassroots anti-poverty agency that serves Douglas County.



Intergenerational friendship has flourished between activists Dancer Davis (left) and Geoff Alexander.



Dan Craig (left), a fourth-generation Salemite, lives there with his partner, Salem Rainbow Youth board member Ross Stout.

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