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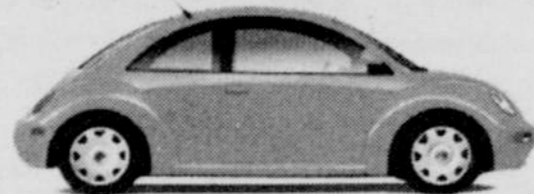
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culture

20 Years in Spiritual Kinship

SisterSpirit celebrates diversity of traditions

by Patricia L. MacAodha

Twenty years is a significant length of time for a small, nonprofit spirituality group not only to survive but flourish as an instrument of support for spiritual women. During the weekend of Dec. 10 and 11, SisterSpirit will celebrate 20 years of active participation in the Portland-area Pagan, political and queer communities from which it draws the bulk of its participants.

In November 1985, six women met to discuss creating an interfaith women's group—one that would include a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. The bond was to be their shared experience as women with a spiritual connection that could override traditions. Women attending that meeting were Pagan, Christian and Jewish; most were lesbians, but the agreement was reached at that time to make SisterSpirit open to all women, regardless of spiritual background or gender orientation.

"If you have a women's spiritual group, the focus is women—primarily women who feel comfortable with women and who are not exclusive, who want to build community with all kinds of women," says SisterSpirit's coordinator, the Rev. Frodo Okulam.

She believes this is SisterSpirit's strength, and it is a strength that has sometimes been challenged. Founding member Sally Cohn, who is also active with the Lesbian Community Project, recalls, "Some left because Christian women were included from the start." She likes the interfaith nature of the group and "the way SisterSpirit is supportive and welcoming of trans women."

In fact, the group's emergency fund is one of very few named after a trans woman, deceased member Michelle Weise. The fund, Michelle's Heart, serves women and their children in emergency situations. Weise also helped develop the policy that still guides the group's acceptance of trans women.

At the initial meeting, a ritual (called a "celebration") was planned that would include elements of the beliefs represented, plus any that participants wanted to contribute. This was the beginning of the annual honoring of wintertime spiritual traditions: Christmas, Hanukkah, Yule (Winter Solstice), Mother Night, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Saint Lucia's Day, the Festival of Amaterasu and others. The traditions selected are always left to the planners of the event, but each year includes the Lucia brides: one an adult wearing a crown of flaming candles, and one a child in a crown of lights (often portrayed by the kids and grandkids of SisterSpirit members). Their entrance always draws a gasp of awe and delight, no matter how often it has been done.

This year's adult Lucia, Elizabeth Corrigan, was a six-year member of SisterSpirit's coordinating council and is volunteering as coordinator of the group's annual spring equinox festival, PaganFaire. She found SisterSpirit "about nine months after it started" and has seen the group as "my main spiritual organization for 20 years, very much my community." Corrigan says she can't remember a time when being a lesbian was an issue. "I never felt anything but acceptance."




The Rev. Frodo Okulam coordinates SisterSpirit, an interfaith women's group that offers workshops, classes, celebrations, discussion groups and a drumming circle.

Being in the middle ground, the group has faced some struggles, but nothing time and determination have not overcome. SisterSpirit emerged out of Metropolitan Community Church of Portland as a special ministry of the Northwest District. From the beginning it was not like a regular church but was designated "ministry in an interfaith setting." Okulam says the connection has always been a loose affiliation. "MCC doesn't define who we are; we define ourselves," but SisterSpirit's presence has influenced the denomination's awareness regarding "women's issues, earth-based spirituality and the feminine face of the divine."

Cohn agrees. Participation in SisterSpirit "broadened my appreciation of earth justice and spirituality," she says. She also notes the group's focus on activism, recalling its participation in anti-war demonstrations, environmental causes (including tree-sitting) and a long-standing support for queer civil rights. (Okulam, an ordained MCC minister, has performed many marriages for gay and lesbian couples—both Christian and Pagan in structure.) Activism remains a part of the group's spirituality, from participation in public protests to letter-writing campaigns.

And the outreach continues to welcome new women. Lesbian photographer Janet Redhawk joined the group through its writers circle.

"SisterSpirit is a great organization—very accepting of all the diversity in our community," she says. "The feeling of belonging washes over you when you enter their office. It is a comfort to know that they are here." 

SISTERSPIRIT celebrates its 20th birthday with a potluck feast, benefit raffle and storytelling from 2 to 5 p.m. Dec. 10 at Musician's Union Hall, 325 N.E. 20th Ave. The suggested donation is \$5-\$500. For more information call 503-736-3297.

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