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Discussing Hate Crimes

Local conference examines hate of all kinds

by Julie Sabatier

Hate comes in many different forms. This year, Portland's Coalition Against Hate Crimes decided to delve into the complex nature of hatred June 21 to 23 on Portland Community College's Cascade Campus.

The 2006 Oregon Hate Crimes Conference addressed issues such as race, gender, law enforcement, harassment, violence, anti-Semitism and sexuality. With more than 30 workshops and five keynote speakers, the conference was jam-packed with poignant stories, practical information and, occasionally, a little humor.

Started by the American Jewish Committee in Portland, the coalition held its first meeting in the fall of 1997. Since then, it has been organizing rallies and speakers to educate people about the roots of hate. Now with more than 50 member organizations, the coalition is encouraging conversations between a diverse range of community groups such as the Japanese American Citizens League, the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, the FBI and even the Church of Scientology of Portland.

On the first day of the conference, former Basic Rights Oregon director Roey Thorpe led a workshop titled "Climate of Hate: How Oregon's Anti-Gay Ballot Issues Promote Hate and Violence." She began by listing Oregon's last seven attempts at ballot measures that would limit the rights of the sexual minorities community, including Measure 36, which successfully banned same-sex marriage in the state in 2004.

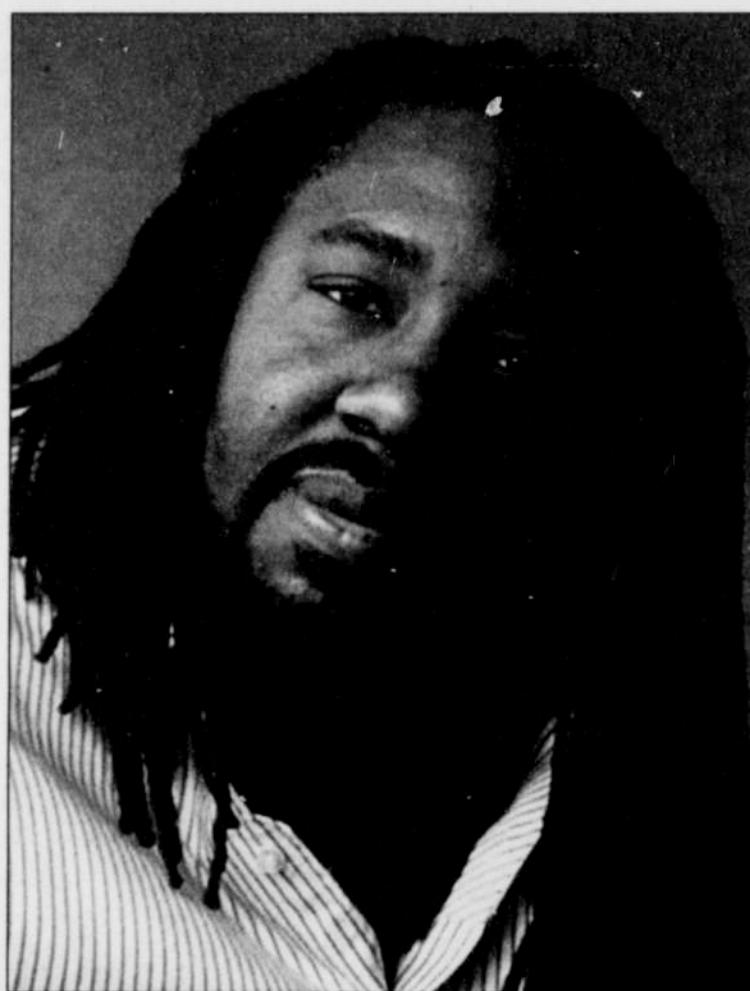
"We are always reactive, and we don't get a chance to be proactive," said Thorpe. "Why haven't we passed statewide nondiscrimination legislation? Because of these ballot measures." Oregon has seen more anti-gay ballot measure campaigns than any other state.

Thorpe spoke about the next ballot measure assault on the community, the Student Protection Act. Spearheaded by Oregon Citizens Alliance chairman Lon Mabon, the proposed constitutional amendment would prevent Oregon public schools from kindergarten through college from teaching anything "that would express approval of, endorse or otherwise make morally acceptable the behaviors of homosexuality, bisexuality or transgendered conduct."

Citing national statistics, Thorpe pointed out that reported hate crimes against people in the sexual minorities community went up by 26 percent in 2003. This was the same year that Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage, followed by campaigns in several states to adopt bans like Measure 36.

In the ensuing discussion, many testified to the emotional toll these ballot measure campaigns can take. "Most of us construct our lives so that we have to encounter homophobia as little as possible, but during ballot measure campaigns, there's no escaping it," Thorpe said.

One conference attendee related a chilling episode from earlier in the day, highlighting the



Keynote speaker Clarence Patton leads New York City's Anti-Violence Project, a group that addresses hate toward many different vulnerable communities.

fact that no one can isolate themselves from hate speech, even at a conference designed to help eradicate hatred. He was reading a copy of *Just Out* in a campus common area prior to the morning's keynote speech by Multnomah County domestic violence prosecutor Rod Underhill. When he got up, he says someone at a nearby table of PCC maintenance workers laughed and said, "Hold me back or I'm going to commit a hate crime."

Keynote speaker Clarence Patton spoke to the pervasive nature of hate speech as well as hate crimes. He traveled from New York City, where he serves as executive director of the Anti-Violence Project.

"Hate violence and the fear of that violence is a defining element of the LGBT identity," Patton said. "All of us modify our behavior because we fear that violence. And I would argue that as soon as we begin to change how we act in society, we are victims of this form of terrorism."

Patton's use of the word "nigger" in his talk made some people in the audience visibly uncomfortable. "I don't like to say 'the n word,'" he explained. "I just feel silly." He went on to discuss the perceived power of hate-motivated slurs saying, "For some of us after a certain point in time, there's very little that people can do to us that we don't let them do to us."

Offering a little levity to an otherwise heavy discussion, Patton talked about his "Altar of Oppression," where he displays offensive caricatures of "mammies" and "sambos" on a giant watermelon candle. "I'm a very fortunate person, and I get to work out all my issues through my job," he said.

The Anti-Violence Project is a great example

of an organization that touches many different vulnerable communities in one of America's most diverse places. The project grew out of outrage at police negligence in cases of anti-gay violence in the late 1970s. Now, Patton says, the project has a working relationship with the men and women in blue. It conducts sensitivity training at various levels of the police force.

"Training is almost a red herring," Patton explained, "because, at the end of the day, you are talking about a paramilitary organization. The command structure is going to dictate what happens on the ground. The real commitment comes from getting the buy-in from commanding officers."

A workshop later in the day addressed the relationship between Portland's sexual minorities community and the city's law enforcement officials. North Precinct Cmdr. Jim Ferraris joined forces with William Warren, crime prevention coordinator at the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, to discuss the Sexual Minorities

Roundtable, one of the Portland Police Bureau's nine advisory committees designed to reach out to specific communities. Under Chief Charles Moose, it finalized a "partnership agreement" that Warren helped broker with members of the sexual minorities community. The group meets monthly to discuss issues within the bureau as well as interactions in the community.

"Our mission is pretty simple," said Ferraris. "We build relationships. We have a lot of work to do, and I look to [the roundtable] to carry that forward and develop some criteria for the police bureau."

The roundtable is evidence that the bureau has gone through a paradigm shift in the past decade, but there is still room for improvement. While Warren, an out gay man, expressed exasperation with the "alphabet soup" of the "LGBTQ" label, Ferraris seemed confused about Portland's leather community and its attendance at roundtable meetings. "Is that an activity, or is that a lifestyle that you're born into?" he asked. "That's a recreational activity. Or maybe it isn't. We've been wrestling with this."

Conference chairwoman Mandy Ellertson said she was pleased to see such a broad range of people bringing different backgrounds and areas of expertise to the table. But she would have liked a better turnout. (The roundtable workshop was attended by four people, including a conference organizer.)

"I thought every presenter did a wonderful job, though, and the people that came had a lot of good opportunities to challenge themselves about what actions to take in this fight against hate and bias," Ellertson said. 10