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Immigrant Rights, Not Special Rights

Basic Rights Oregon draws a connection to queer rights with a workshop

by West Duncan

For years the queer community has heard, "Equal rights are not special rights." The expression, sometimes in the form of a rally cry, has been thrown around at Gay Pride parades, national rallies for legalized same-sex marriage and adoption agencies.

But haven't you heard it somewhere else before? Basic Rights Oregon and Jessica Lee, the agency's youth field organizer, are bringing the old adage back

with a new meaning. BRO hasn't let the familiar argument of equal rights pass it by, especially as crucial election deadlines approach. BRO is hosting an interactive workshop to educate attendees about the symbiotic relationship that exists between the sexual and gender minorities community and immigrants. The groups are united by the discrimination they both face.

"Immigrant rights are at a high point in the media lately, both locally and nationally," says Lee. "This is a controversial issue that creates conversation...we have a lot of the same things in our community."

As seen in the Del Monte Fresh Produce food processing plant raid July 12 in North Portland by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, racial equality is raising some familiar questions about a threatened community's place in the city. The raid resulted in a roundup of 160 undocumented immigrant workers.

These questions don't come as much of a surprise. Up until the late 1940s, Stumptown earned its reputation as "the most prejudiced [city] in the country," according to documents obtained by the Oregon Historical Society. In the 1920s, black Oregonians were not allowed within the city limits of Portland as one official form of segregation, despite the fact that the population of African Americans hovered at 20,000. The Ku Klux Klan also called the Pittock Building in downtown Portland home and operated rampantly within the state. The group had little problems finding members, as 90 percent of the state was white.

The city has made progress.

Out of the 1.7 million folks in Multnomah County, whites top the scales at 75.5 percent, the black population exceeds the state average at 6.6 percent, Hispanics are at 6.8 percent, American Indians at 2.3 percent, Vietnamese at 2.0 percent, Chinese at 1.4 percent, Filipinos at 0.5 percent and Japanese at 0.5 percent. Out of these statistics, same-sex households are 0.8 percent lesbian and 0.6 percent gay. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, these numbers show an 8.9 percent population change since 2000.

Once spread throughout Portland, minorities have been largely relegated to the Albina neighborhood since the '60s. With this area also being the most densely populated area of sexual and

gender minorities, it continues to bond the two communities in the same struggle.

"Each group can be attacked to gain a certain platform, and now we can see how the far right is pitting us against each other. We're vulnerable because we're kept in the margins," Lee notes. "These attacks are nothing new politically."

BRO will use the interactive workshop to talk about the historical markers, current events and



Gay rights supporters and Latino activists gathered April 10, 2006, in Terry Schruck Plaza for a rally protesting a strict immigration proposal passed by the U.S. House.

personal experiences that compose this complex issue. In an effort to spark a far-reaching discussion about the fusion of black/white and gay/straight mentalities and their similar origins, BRO plans to take this workshop statewide. Volunteers for the organization hope to continue pushing for change among the already progressive trends.

BRO acknowledges that this course doesn't happen alone or overnight. Community members and groups such as Oregon's Immigrants Rights Coalition and Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United have worked to take on immigration reform, bringing the issue of equal rights to the forefront. Gay rights groups such as the Human Rights Campaign and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays echo this argument, making the inequities these two groups face hard to ignore.

BRO aims to continue championing for equal rights in Oregon by being proactive in calls to action and education workshops that will recall earlier struggles for equality, whether they be slavery or Stonewall. Lee says, "This is core in sharing basic values."

Maybe equal rights really are special rights. 10

The IMMIGRANT RIGHTS WORKSHOP starts 7 p.m. July 26 at Augustana Lutheran Church, 2710 N.E. 14th Ave. To attend, contact julieatbasicrights@gmail.com.

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