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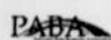
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Can't Argue with PFLAG

Portland's group for parents celebrates 25 years

by Pat Young

The Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) has been around for a very long time. In July it will celebrate its 25th anniversary. Dawn Holt, the chapter president, said there has been a lot of discussion among the members about when this chapter really started. Was it in 1976 when Ann Shepherd and Charles Knapp put up a card table at Portland Pride and talked to people about coming to a meeting? Was it in 1982 when the official paperwork was filed for nonprofit status? Like many grassroots organizations, Holt believes parents were meeting for a long time before they actually incorporated.

"I kind of want us to get unstuck on that issue. The point is that we have been around for a long time. I think it is incredible, and we need to celebrate that," says Holt.

Being president for this 25th anniversary is a bit humbling for Holt. "There has been so much history before me, and my board and I feel this bit of weight to make sure the organization carries forward and that we continue to be as meaningful as I think we have been."

Through the years, the work that PFLAG has done has paralleled the gay rights movement, notes Holt. In the early 1970s when various groups were first getting organized, so was PFLAG. When Shepherd and Knapp attended Portland Pride in 1976, they came away with the names of more members for their fledgling parents' organization. The following year, Knapp marched in the parade and even more people joined the group.

Ann and Bill Shepherd along with Charles and Rita Knapp were the founding members of the Portland chapter. The Shepherds remained

active for years, while the Knapps worked with local church congregations to be open and confirming to gays.

In the mid-1980s, when the AIDS crisis was in full swing, some parents in PFLAG had children with AIDS. PFLAG members learned all they could about the disease.

The Portland chapter was strong enough by 1986 to host the fifth annual national convention of PFLAG. Several hundred people attended the event, which featured workshops ranging in topics from "Small Town Survival" to "Substance Abuse in the Gay and Lesbian Community."

When the anti-gay ballot measures swept across Oregon in 1988, 1992 and 1994, there was a spike in PFLAG's membership as parents stepped up to battle the measures. PFLAG members have

testified before the Legislature in Salem in support of gay rights legislation, including last year's bills against discrimination and for domestic partnerships. Parents have provided some of the most moving testimony.

"It is really, really hard to argue with a PFLAG mom," says Holt. "You can't deny what my experience has been like with my own child and what we have come to learn as an otherwise white, middle-class, suburban family. You just can't deny that kind of power."

All the advances in gay rights may give a false sense of security. "There is a little bit of a myth out there that because Portland is as open as it is and because we have the new laws that there is not as much of a need for PFLAG," says Holt. "But that has not been my experience."

There is still very much a need for PFLAG to continue with its traditional role of offering support and education in the community. Holt

"It is really, really hard to argue with a PFLAG mom. You can't deny what my experience has been like with my own child."

—Dawn Holt

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