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On the Road to Equality

Hermiston wades into the "Pride" pool

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

Hermiston held its first-ever "Equality Event" Aug. 2—a blending of Gay Pride, Latino Pride and Iraq War awareness and activism in one meta-progressive day of speakers, exhibition, community fair and more, in the city's downtown Victory Square Park.

For working-class Hermiston—population 15,410, chockablock with farm parts stores and pickups, and home of the country's first Shari's restaurant—it was poised to be a major event shaking up the very soul of this sleepy conservative community.

But for 22-year-old openly gay Hermiston resident Shane Villanueva, it was ultimately a disappointment: "I could probably count on one hand the gay people I know in this town," he said in an interview after walking through Victory Square Park to check out the event. "It's such a small town, and it wasn't publicized good enough," he said, adding, "It doesn't help that this town is still kind of really religious."

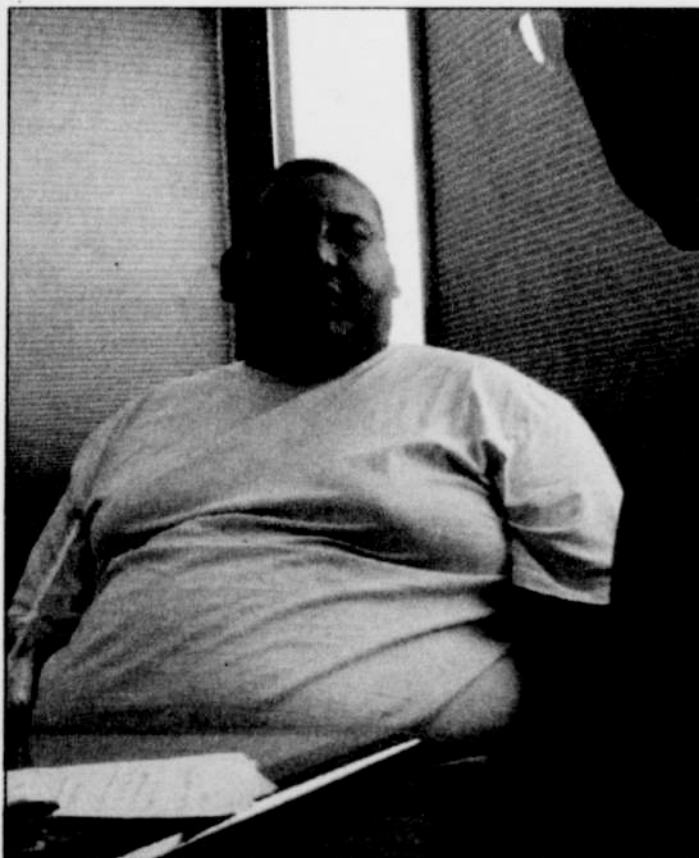
I ventured out to Umatilla County with another queer friend that weekend to take the pulse of gay life in rural eastern Oregon, and chronicled my trip to Hermiston and back with live blogging at JustOut.com. Here are some excerpts from my adventure "on the road to equality."

• 4:35 p.m. Aug. 1: The car stereo iPod is pumping out Cyndi Lauper and Chanticleer as my travel mate and I round another low mountain highway corner, the choke of green disappearing in that quick instant of a 90-degree turn to reveal another jaw-dropping expanse of Oregon rural flatland. We're still a good two hours outside Hermiston, buzzing through Bingen, Wash. "God, I love America," said my travel companion, and hey, I think he really meant it.

• 7:02 p.m. Aug. 1: We arrive at our destination—Umatilla's Tillicum Inn—just after 7 p.m. and hustle out of the car to unload our bags and stretch our legs. We're hit with our first wave of country cow stench. It just about knocks us on the ground.

• 7:40 p.m. Aug. 1: I'm meeting with 31-year-old openly gay event organizer Frank Roa, director of the region's progressive human dignity group, Umatilla Morrow Alternatives, in the lobby of the Oxford Suites hotel in downtown Hermiston. The stocky, soft-spoken activist tries to downplay any sense of occasion about the looming event, even as he rattles off the myriad ways in which he's been spreading the word: through community fliering, Craigslist postings, e-mail messages and public service announcements on local radio stations. He's even got up the gumption to ride on a Umatilla Morrow Alternatives float in the annual Umatilla County Fair Parade, which kicks off after his "Equality Event." Roa says the float will feature rainbow flags—three, to be precise.

• 1:42 a.m. Aug. 2: Though the closest gay bar to Hermiston is an hour north in Tri-Cities, Wash., there are straight strip clubs in Umatilla County by the score. One



STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN

Umatilla Morrow Alternatives director Frank Roa says, "We just need to engage more in the community" on equality issues in eastern Oregon.

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