

of them, Riverside Sports Bar, directly abuts the low-budget hotel my travel mate and I are staying in. At midnight, Riverside was hopping with tattooed young dudes in their 20s, kicking back Miller Lites and throwing down fivers for the mainstage dancing girls. I look for any signs of latent queerness or closety behavior from these tough guys...and come up empty-handed.

• **11:40 a.m. Aug. 2:** Outside Hermiston Drug on Main Street, two women—Louise, in her early 50s, and Deborah, around mid-30s—are peddling homemade goat's milk soaps and herbal sachets as part of the town's Main Street Bazaar. I tell them about today's "Equality Event," and they say they haven't heard a peep about it.

"I don't have a problem with the gay lifestyle. I'm not gay. Umm, I...I believe in respect for everybody," Louise says. "But...why do people need to have recognition for that? I mean, you know, personally, because I'm heterosexual, I don't get recognition for that." She laughs. "I mean, I don't see the need for that."

Deborah pipes in: "Well, you know what, I think that it's really persecuted."

"Well, it shouldn't be," Louise shoots back.

"And they want to have something that, they can meet people," Deborah continues.

"Well, they can do it just like we do it," Louise says. "You know, if somebody wants to be gay, that's no reflection on me. But sometimes, you know, the demonstrations like what we see in New York, what we see in San Francisco, that just doesn't fit."

• **1:34 p.m. Aug. 2:** I've made it over to Victory Square Park for the "Equality Event," and here's the news so far: There's a barbecue grill fired up, an F-150 Pickup blasting Spanish pop and a crowd of about 30 milling about. For a perfect, dry, 80-degree afternoon, the crowd seems scant.

Blue-topped open tents dot the park's south side—United Farm Workers, Cascade AIDS Project, Oregon Gay Straight Alliance Association—with tables full of cards and brochures. The north swath is bisected by the "Eyes Wide Open" Iraq war exhibition, including a field's-length series of Tibetan prayer flags strung



United Farm Workers was a strong presence at Hermiston's first-ever "Equality Event."

in purples, reds and whites, on which the names of Oregonian casualties are written. A light breeze flutters the flags up and down the line. Like little stammering spirits, the flags seem to speak with the breeze. It's a completely engrossing visual statement on the war.

• **3:35 p.m. Aug. 2:** I'm sitting down in the sun to talk with a bisexual 18-year-old woman named Linda, a lifelong Hermiston resident. Linda tells me that she's identified as bisexual for a few years now and that it's been pretty much a nonissue for her, at least in school. I ask about her dating life: She claims "about four or five girlfriends and maybe seven boyfriends" in her high school career. Not bad.

• **3:52 p.m. Aug. 2:** Some of the tabling organizations have already packed up and gone, and Roa stands alone on the south lawn, smoking a cigarette. His chatty and affable mom (wearing big hoop gold earrings that say "Darlene") is sitting with a few friends and family members in the shade. "We wish people had come out for this," she says, her big brown eyes swimming.

• **4:48 p.m. Aug. 2:** I've finally spotted my first unquestionably gay local: a stocky, wavy-haired barista wearing a silver-studded belt, working the Hermiston Starbucks drive-through window. When my travel mate and I order our drinks, he stops cold and stares us down, makes small talk and giggles nervously. I don't remember seeing him earlier at the "Equality Event"—maybe he was working? Maybe he didn't know about it? Maybe he's not out? Not knowing how to intervene—or even if we should—my friend and I grab our coffees to go, wave goodbye and hit the highway back to Portland. 10

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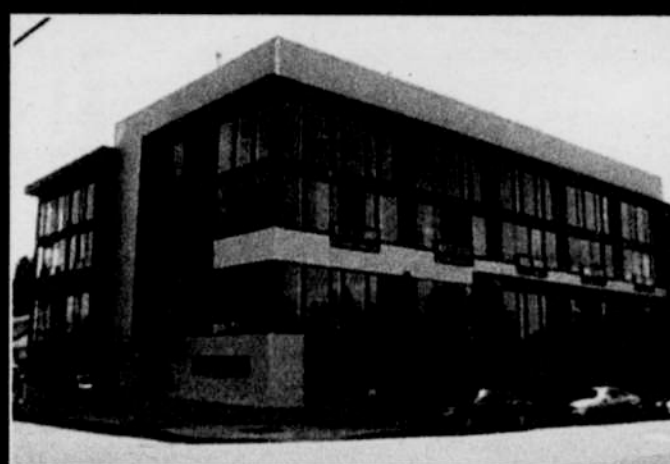
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