

Corralling a Community

The Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest bridge the LGBTQ history gap

BY RYAN J. PRADO

When it comes to preserving history, time is of the essence. Every second that passes means more and more conjecture, more haze, less accuracy—and that's not even taking into consideration that venomous Achilles' heel of perspective. In the race to document the now, the process of ensuring an acute scope on the then takes on an immediacy—and in the race to share the history of the LGBTQ community in the Pacific Northwest, it's even more urgent.

Enter the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest.

GLAPN was established in 1994, one of the first archive projects of its kind in the United States. At the time, there were precious few efforts to document any aspect of LGBTQ history, and there were concerns that history could be rewritten and corrupted by those trying to denounce it.

"Stop to think for a moment that there really are virtually no academic or public bodies vested with significant funding to actually preserve queer history, and this problem still exists today," explains GLAPN president Robert Douglass. "University programs with gender-based study programs are good candidates now, but these are relatively recent, and even they are struggling to gather fundamental research material on this contemporary subject."

Fortunately, those who cared in Oregon stepped up to form the all-volunteer organization. The group—which on average numbers around 12 volunteer researchers, archivists and community leaders—branches out to track down oral histories, documents of historical interest, memorabilia and more. The Oregon Historical Society holds the GLAPN archives and do the work of making the information available to scholars and others hoping for a closer look at the Pacific Northwest's rich queer history.

Need information about the Portland Vice Clique Scandal of 1912? GLAPN volunteer researcher George Painter is in the process of finishing a book about it. Want to know more about Portland's Two Spirit Society? GLAPN secretary Robin Will took the lead on last April's public dialogue session at the Native American Center. Few things get by the all-volunteer crew.

In addition, GLAPN has been an immeasurably important contributor to Q Center's ongoing Our Stories series, which aims to revisit the popular subject of Oregon's queer history pioneers. GLAPN is currently in the brainstorming phase of upcoming Our Stories installations, including the role of gay bars in queer history and another on the role of queer



A September 1988 clipping of David Reinhard's *Oregonian* column decrying the Cascade AIDS Project posters on Tri-Met buses.

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PRESIDENT, GLAPN

sports within the local community. They also hope to sponsor lectures on faith and aging within the queer community as potential future topics.

In essence, the organization bridges the generational and cultural gaps in LGBTQ history for an ever-evolving community. While the nonprofit does not specifically conduct the archiving work for the various LGBTQ organizations in the region, they do encourage any queer-inclusive organization to gather and preserve aspects of its operating history since the 1970s in order to document its queer heritage before "contributing members disappear and the stories are lost to time," explains Douglass.

The uphill battle to get the information documented and archived is compounded by GLAPN's lack of active members.

"Our annual budget would just about buy you a latte at work every day for a year," says Will. "We can't do all of the work, so we're most effective as a clearinghouse for information, and a catalyst to help people and organizations preserve their own histories."

This doesn't mean that those who are consistently dedicating their time have little with which to work. As Will reports,

GLAPN members typically field questions, make referrals, evaluate donated materials or actually provide short-term homes for donated materials.

Douglass says GLAPN picks the projects it pursues based upon the willingness of individual members to help execute them.

"We cannot take on more than our members are willing to put into the effort in their spare time," explains Douglass, "but the satisfaction of a story well told is what compels most of us."

One key bridge for GLAPN lies in being able to engage a younger generation of students with a history they are unlikely to hear about in any other way. The LGBTQ History Capstone class at Portland State University—taught by GLAPN treasurer Pat Young—is perhaps the most helpful and visible vehicle for GLAPN's continued success.

"Since GLAPN is an all-volunteer organization, it really helps to have the students gather oral histories for us and to sort through collections," says Young. "The people we have interviewed usually have a wonderful time talking to the students, and it has been a real eye-opener for some of the students to hear stories from the old days."

"Working with schools and universities [is] a top priority in our mission," continues Douglass. "In this way, we can turn on and engage a new generation, who in turn will become the teachers of tomorrow."

As an apolitical organization, GLAPN is also able to observe where imbalances may lie in the accurate representation of queer heritage. Douglass reports that there's been a large turnaround in the last five years for greater dialogue on the transgender community. GLAPN helped document the 30th anniversary of the Northwest Gender Alliance in 2010.

"We are at the mercy of those members of our community to share what information they have to offer," says Douglass. "It is not elitism that determines what stories are being told and preserved, but rather who are the ones who are stepping forward and being accounted for."

GLAPN has come a long way since its inception, and Douglass says he hopes to continue to break historical archiving barriers.

"I would like to encourage more dialogue with those communities that wish to be represented more uniquely and with a greater honesty than ever before." JO

GLAPN's next public meeting is Monday, March 28 at 7 p.m. at Q Center (4115 N. Mississippi Ave.). To learn more about GLAPN, visit glapn.org.

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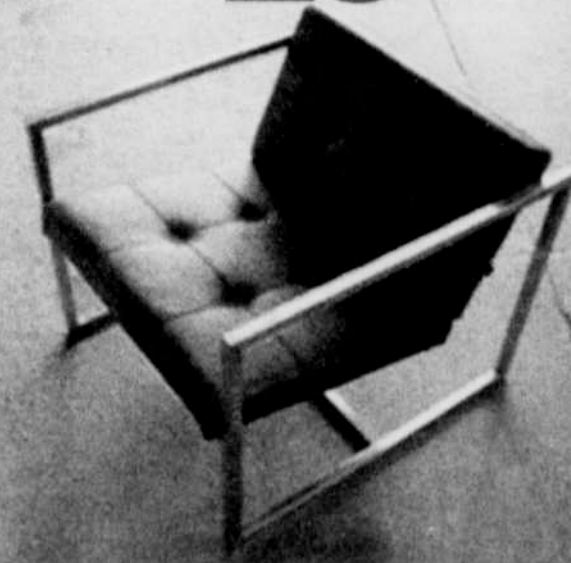
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