

Don't Forget Your Roots

NOTE: Some names have been changed to protect both the guilty and the innocent.

Prior to becoming a card-carrying member of the Oregon Bears, I had a heart-to-heart talk with then president Frank Armstrong, as I had slight apprehensions that I wouldn't fit in or be welcome. After all, I'm not exactly a classic Bear specimen. There's nary a hair on my face and you couldn't convince my chest to grow any hair—not even for all the tea in China.

During our chat, Frank allayed my fears and explained the Bears' roots to me and how the movement came into being. He told me Bears are usually more accepting and diverse because, in the past, they were shunned and ostracized for being different than other gays. Since they know what it feels like to be excluded, inclusiveness is one of the Bear movement's tenets. Frank also said being a Bear is not just physical but a state of mind. If you think like a Bear and act like one, you are a Bear.

So I signed up and became a member. As a whole, the Oregon Bears have been very welcoming. I was embraced from the outset by this fun-loving group of men (and a few women). In this group, I found a sense of community, brotherhood and camaraderie. It wasn't long before some Bears started calling me "Panda" and the nickname stuck.



panda say what?!

BY BENNIE TAN

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This past February, I coordinated a fundraiser for Shane, a fellow Oregon Bears member who had to have emergency colon surgery. He didn't have health insurance and was growing overwhelmed with medical bills. I created a Facebook event page to spread the word and Terri (not her real name), a mutual friend of ours, wrote on the event page's wall that she would love to support Shane. Terri attended high school with Shane's sister, self-identifies as queer (bisexual) but is currently married to a man. She is very much a part of the queer community, so I was surprised when she didn't show up.

The next time I saw her, Terri explained what happened. Karl (not his real name), a

self-proclaimed Bear, spotted her posting on Facebook and decided to email her saying she wasn't welcome to the event because she was a woman. He claimed the bar where the event was held was a "sanctuary" for Bear men only. I was stunned.

Terri felt uncomfortable, and she didn't go. I was beyond livid when Terri told me she later discovered Karl was not local but lived in Alaska and Colorado. I couldn't fathom why an individual who wasn't involved in the local Bear community took the time—had the audacity—to tell someone they weren't welcome at a charitable event because of gender. It was a fundraiser, for heaven's sake! I really wanted to give Karl a piece of my mind so I searched for his profile on Facebook, to no avail.

I've had an experience similar to Terri's. Last June, right after our Bear run called BearTown, I received hate mail on my official Oregon Bears email account from Dick (not his real name but indicative of his character), an Oregon Bears member. In it he opined I was "downright silly" for considering myself a Bear. Dick went on to explain, "A white guy may support civil rights and speak out against

racism and even join the NAACP, but he does not become black!"

Isn't Dick a lovely person?

I decided to pull a Margaret Cho and post Dick's message, complete with his email address, on my Facebook page. Several of my friends—who are Bears and consider me a Bear—emailed Dick, chastising him for being a bigot, demanding an explanation and apology. Needless to say, being the bully and coward that he is, Dick never responded.

What is perplexing to me is how quickly people like Karl and Dick forget their roots. As Bears, how can they forget what it felt like to be singled out and discriminated against and start doing the same to others?

What I'm writing about isn't exclusive to the Bear community. As queers, we're all inherently different from heteros and have, at some point, been discriminated against. I get very disheartened when I witness and experience instances where queers hate on each other when we really should be rallying together.

It is vital for the Bear community—and queers in general—to always remember where we came from and learn from our past. We must never forget our roots, lest we turn into the very people who shunned us. ☐

Genetically, the giant panda was recently proven to be part of the bear family, so don't you tell Bennie he is not a Bear. This Panda accepts non-hate emails at pdxpandacub@gmail.com.

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