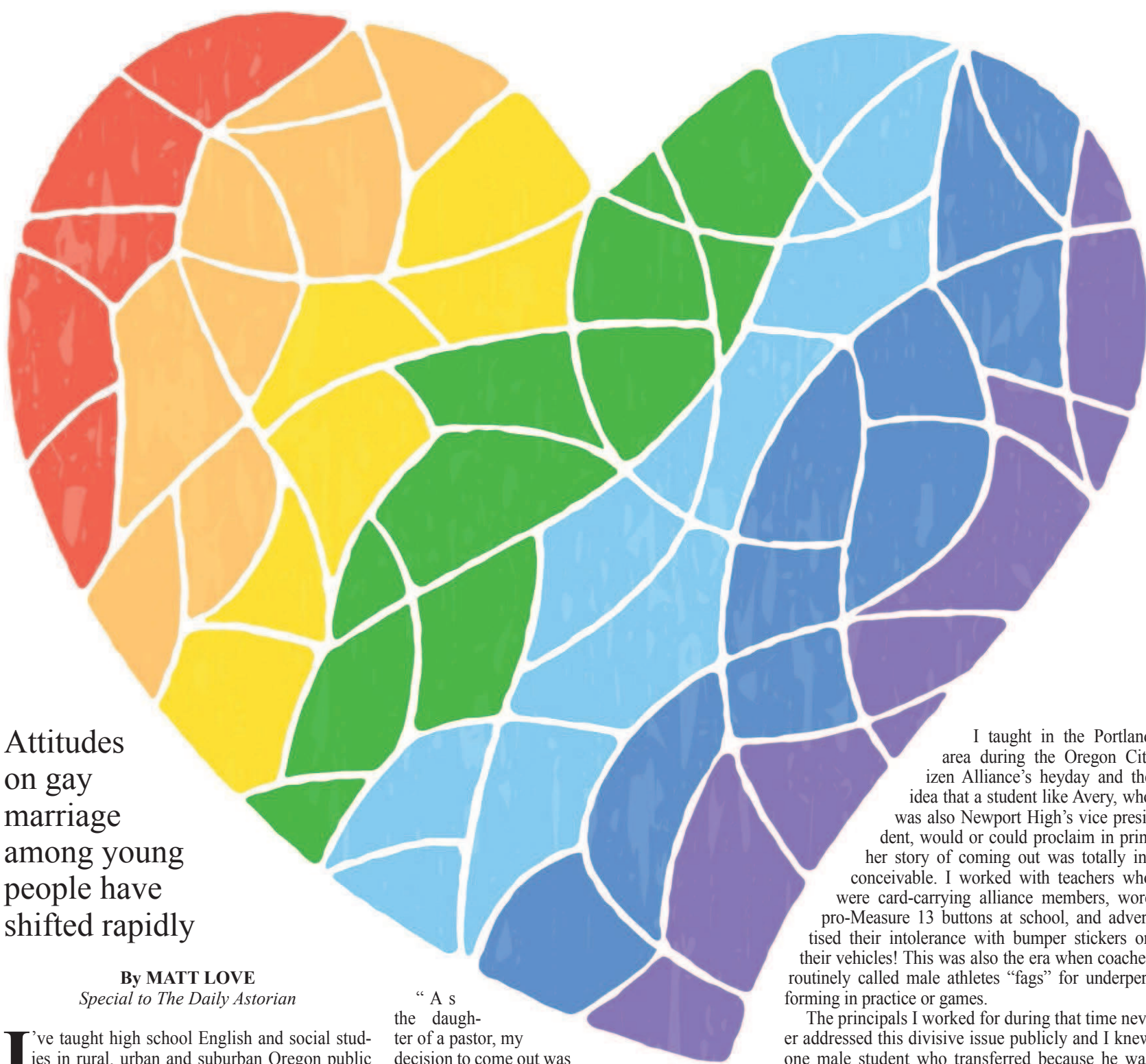


THE LONG ROAD TO ACCEPTANCE



Attitudes on gay marriage among young people have shifted rapidly

By MATT LOVE
Special to The Daily Astorian

I've taught high school English and social studies in rural, urban and suburban Oregon public schools since the late 1980s and have seen a lot of changes during that time: the rise of computers, the domination of testing mandates, the privatization of many classified jobs, new teacher evaluation protocols, more students prescribed anti-depressants, fears of a school shooting, increase of non-English speaking students, special math and science initiatives for female students, more female administrators, reduction of creative arts opportunities for children, and so on.

Many people have welcomed these developments. Many have resisted and other changes have proved catastrophic.

But the one big positive change I've witnessed over the course of my eclectic teaching career is the seismic shift to acceptance of gay, lesbian and transgender students, even in rural communities outside of the more liberal places like Portland and Eugene.

Truly, I never saw it coming. I never thought this monumental shift would occur in my professional lifetime. Thank goodness it did; it literally has saved lives.

My teaching history with the subject has been an interesting one. Several years ago, I served as advisor for Newport High School's student newspaper, *The Harbor Light*. During my tenure, I had three students in three different years write regular columns about their experiences as a gay or lesbian teenager in a small town on the Oregon Coast. One of the columns was called "We The People," and it was written by then-junior Avery Heater. Her debut column, published in 2009 began:

"As the daughter of a pastor, my decision to come out was a difficult one. First, I confided in my sister. I will never forget that night, creeping into her room at age 14, far past midnight, and whispering to her like a child would. Next, I told my parents. My mom cried at first, but from that day until this one they have epitomized support."

The column went on to describe how the community's reaction to her sexual orientation affected her. It was not an easy road to travel in Newport — then or now. But look how far we have come in Oregon to make gay, lesbian and transgender students feel welcome and safe in public schools. Many high school campuses even have LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) clubs with faculty advisors and affiliations with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).

We weren't always so tolerant in public schools. Remember Oregon in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Oregon Citizens Alliance led by Lon Mabon qualified a series of homophobic ballot measures that tore this state apart?

Remember the notorious Measure 9, in 1992 and Measure 13, in 1994? The former sought to amend the state constitution to declare: "All governments in Oregon may not use their monies or properties to promote, encourage or facilitate homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism or masochism. All levels of government, including public education systems, must assist in setting a standard for Oregon's youth which recognizes that these behaviors are abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse and they are to be discouraged and avoided."

I taught in the Portland area during the Oregon Citizens Alliance's heyday and the idea that a student like Avery, who was also Newport High's vice president, would or could proclaim in print her story of coming out was totally inconceivable. I worked with teachers who were card-carrying alliance members, wore pro-Measure 13 buttons at school, and advertised their intolerance with bumper stickers on their vehicles! This was also the era when coaches routinely called male athletes "fags" for underperforming in practice or games.

The principals I worked for during that time never addressed this divisive issue publicly and I knew one male student who transferred because he was consistently assaulted by other male students and nobody did a damn thing about it, including me. That would never happen today and we as a culture are much better as a result.

Over two decades ago, Oregonians defeated both those ballot measures (although 638,527 people voted for Measure 9). In the ensuing years the climate for acceptance in much of Oregon dramatically changed, but it obviously engendered a backlash and the result was 2004's Measure 36, the ballot measure that passed by a large majority and amended the state constitution to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

In 2014, a federal judge ruled Measure 36 unconstitutional, allowing same-sex couples to legally marry in Oregon a year before the U.S. Supreme Court guaranteed that right nationally.

The last decade has seen revolutionary change in Oregon, and across the country, on the subject of acceptance of LGBT people and their equal protection under the law. There is still a long way to go and many people and politicians who resist obvious change. Today's students, at least the ones I've taught over the last decade in Oregon, don't resist the change at all. In many ways, by not making a big deal about it and accepting their peers for who they are, they have been in the vanguard on this issue. I certainly know they've taught me a lot.

Matt Love is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including "The Great Birthright." He teaches English and creative writing at Astoria High School.

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