

Love for All

Lower Columbia Q Center IS Community

MY LATE GRANDMOTHER used to say--and was proof herself--that kindness is the ultimate wisdom. We live in a time of extraordinary scientific and technological advances, of inner and outer awareness concerning our place in the world, as well as the direct impact our actions have on the environment and humanity at large. And yet a great many people still devote a seemingly inexhaustible amount of time and energy to the intolerance of designated races, religions, genders, and sexual identities. To offer a more blunt perspective: we've put a man on the moon and are about to perform the first ever head transplant of another, but still somehow find ourselves in the throes of a pending bathroom bill that would demand the exposure and approval of one's genitals before entering a public restroom. In an era of so much progress on so many fronts, it strikes me as somewhat disheartening that we still need Q Centers in our communities, that for many the struggle for acceptance and a safe place in society is a luxury others (like myself) often take for granted.

The Lower Columbia Q Center (LCQC) was officially founded and recognized in 2015. Chairman Marco Davis, along with secretary Tessa Scheller and outreach organizer Jeralyn O'Brien, form the nucleus of the organization, which is located in a donated office space within the Astoria Armory Building.

The LC Q Center follows the emergence of a coastal transgender support group organized in 2013 (see hipfish feature Sept 2013). Later community members organized to address LGBTQ needs in the Lower Columbia Pacific Region, of which has progressed to the Q Center. In the early 90's community members, both gay and straight allies formed the North Coast Pride Network (NCPN) to join forces in educating the voting constituency during the infamous Oregon Citizen Alliance anti-gay measures. The presence of an LGBTQ organization on the coast, active for 15 years as NCPN, helped to establish a core gay community and also measured the support of the region in general, of friends, family, and businesses, many of whom showed support through advertising for example, in the quarterly newsletter, "OUT on the Coast."

In 2003, when Oregon Measure 36 reared its discriminative head, sponsored by the Defense of Marriage Coalition, stating: that only a marriage between one man and one woman shall be valid or legally recognized as a marriage," and passed by a 13% margin, a large and vocal faction of the north coast were shocked and angered -- a testament to the value of organized LGBTQ visibility in this region.

A North Coast PFLAG had a strong run in the past years, as well. Clatsop County Marriage Equality worked closely with Basic Rights Oregon in the 4 year Marriage Matters campaign.

The overturn on Measure 36 in May 2014, that established marriage equality in Oregon - (Geiger v. Kitzhaber and Rummell v. Kitzhaber), and incidently one of the plaintiffs, a native Astorian and one-time NCPN member -- is a historic civil

rights victory, and one that represents a millennium of fear and discrimination. "We've come a long way baby," as the advertisement pitching women's lib once rang out, and the continued work to establish a safe and loving world in all our communities is an essential.

The mission of the LCQC is simple: to provide a safe and welcoming resource and peer support service for the LGBTQ community, friends,



Kaheawai Kaonihi aka KK (Youth Outreach), Tessa Scheller, (Secretary) Marco Davis (Chair) and Jeralyn O'Brien (Outreach Organizer) relax in the Q Center space.

family, and allies of the Lower Columbia Region. But its reach has far extended those perimeters. "People immediately recognize us for our events, which bring a lot of out of town friends and family," Scheller says, "but some people have even permanently relocated. Back in December four people actually moved here from Georgia because of the queer friendly support they experienced." While events like Dragulation and Big Gay Skate Night (soon to be renamed Late Skate & Party in the Mezzanine) continue to draw enormous crowds, the LCQC has also been a steady resource for those in need of services ranging from gender transitioning to coming out to families, addiction and recovery to nurturing healthy relationships with partners and peers. The center operates without judgement or discrimination and, it's important to note, is all volunteer. "We're a grassroots organization," Scheller says. "We're homegrown."

Davis, Scheller, and O'Brien have each applied their unique experiences and insights to their roles within the LCQC. "When I came out as bisexual in 1982, it was much easier than coming out transgender. Still, there wasn't as of yet any organized queer group on the coast," Scheller says. "I moved to Portland and was surprised at how segregated the LGBTQ communities were, even in the larger cities. I thought, we have to integrate." The group agrees that Astoria becomes more progressive with time, moving for-

ward with the current of change rather than opposing it. "This is a town informed by artists and visitors," Scheller says, and Davis agrees that the progress "is genuine." The center prides itself on being approachable, with individuals seeking support and connections, ranging in age from middle school to their 70's seeking a discreet place of support. "It's important to respect and work with each individual's set of challenges,"

recent experience after participating in La Fête, a fashion show benefit for The Harbor. Performing as Daylight Cums, his popular drag persona, Davis tells of a woman in the audience who later emailed him about standing up in her church the following morning and sharing with the congregation how she was inspired by the positive reinforcement both character and performer embodied.

"What many don't understand is that our gender and sexual identities are not a whether-or-not choice, it's about choosing to be visible," Scheller says. "There are definitely consequences of increasing visibility," she adds, and that "safety is always a concern. You're never not aware of the potential threat. But it also outs other people's ignorance." It is one of many goals of the LCQC to make that choice of visibility easier, with unquestionable support and encouragement for the individuals, as well as their families and friends. "Why do we have to keep negativity sacred?" Davis asks, and I must admit that it's a question many of us would be hard pressed to answer.

With the advent of the internet, and scores of available material from which to derive information on and within the LGBTQ community, O'Brien stresses what a difference genuine human connection can make. "There's an obvious need that can't be duplicated online," she says, "the need to meet someone like me, to hold my hand." Scheller in turn credits O'Brien for helping her during her transition, and being an invaluable friend--proof that the core strength of the LCQC comes from within. "We're growing and expanding," O'Brien says, "and it's only going to get better."

In our ever-changing social climate, Davis believe's it is crucial to wash negativity from our vocabulary, particularly in the day-to-day ways we choose to approach and embrace diversity. And what better occasion than Valentine's Day to start. "It sounds corny," says Scheller, who's been married for 42 years, "but love really does make a family. The Q Center is a giant extended family for me, and we want to be that for others."



Photos: Dinah Urell