

MSOP NEWSLETTER

F A L L / W I N T E R 1 9 9 9



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The mission of the Maine Speakout Project is to promote respect and understanding among persons of differing sexual orientations. To accomplish this mission, MSOP trains and empowers volunteers to share their personal experiences and perspectives with individuals and community groups.



The MSOP newsletter

was made possible in

part by a grant from

J.H. Holverson Company.



What's Happening Out There?

Greg Williams

Columbia Falls, Washington County

It was a typical mixture of frustration and exhilaration at a Speakout engagement October 6 at the University of Maine at Machias. I was thrilled to join Washington County chapter head, the internationally illustrious Eilean Mackenzie, in making an obvious difference for our audience. The frustrating part is that the audience was very small and already full of the respect and understanding we at Speakout try to promote. A recurring difficulty of the Speakout experience, in this corner of Maine anyhow, is finding a willing audience that really needs to hear our message.

Eilean and I spoke at a UMM Safe Zone training for members of the university community who want to advertise themselves as open, accepting and helpful to people who may otherwise feel alone or left out because of sexual orientation. Two people showed up for the training and while I would've appreciated a bigger turnout, it did allow all of us to share stories and experiences more personally. As a Speakout volunteer I enjoy having this kind of dialogue more than just telling a story and answering questions. I believe the participants gained from what Eilean and I shared with them and I too benefited greatly. I always get a renewed sense of energy from knowing that someone else in the world shares my commitment to making

the world more "gay-friendly." Now if I could just find some homophobes to spend that energy on...

Linda Monko

Cumberland, Cumberland County

One of the advantages of growing older is the development of long range perspective. This is especially helpful if you've spent much of your life as an advocate for social change. You get to see that change does happen. It may not come as quickly or dramatically as we would have liked in our youth, but rather gradually, over time.

This was the most striking impression I was left with after participating in a Speakout at the training of Resident Advisors at USM-Gorham. Doug Cruger and I spoke to a group of 40 students in August. This Speakout was also filmed by a crew preparing a Maine Public Television program on hate crimes.

Before the program began, while talking with the students to find out more about them, I couldn't help but reflect back in time to the mid-1970s when I worked at U Maine-Orono. As the first Coordinator of Women's Programs and Services at the University, one of my duties was addressing RAs about programs and services for women students. Equal access to sports programs, women's studies, and advocacy against rape were fledgling, radical concepts at that time.

(continued on next page.)

What's Happening Out There?

My student audiences were largely disinterested and, in fact, were frequently hostile in their responses to my presentations.

Discussion about homosexuality was definitely not on the agenda at RA trainings. In fact, at that time, there was no statewide gay and lesbian advocacy organization. There was one campus organization -- the Wilde-Stein group, which literally had a handful of members. Radio and television programs, and newspaper editorials and articles contained no public discussion about homosexuality.

Returning to a college campus in 1999, I found a very different atmosphere. The young women were as self-confident and verbal as the young men. There was a palpable attitude of respect and camaraderie among the students. Rather than breaking new ground with our Speak Out, it was obvious that these students had already grown in a nutrient rich social soil in which they had developed an awareness of diversity and what appeared to be a genuine respect for the differences that are so apparent among humanity.

This was my first Speak Out, and now that I've participated in two others, I know that it was an exceptional one. Discussion and questions were lively following our presentations. We were asked for our comments on how to create an environment that would feel welcoming to gay and lesbian students. There was a great deal of discussion

about the students' experiences and frustrations with Bible-quoting relatives who focused on depravity and abomination.

Because Doug has been a Baptist minister and I too am a Christian raised in a Baptist tradition, students were particularly interested in our personal experiences and thoughts about our faith. There were also comments about students' attempts to address the issue of "special rights" and questions about how we handle this attitude in our work for equal rights for homosexuals.

Several students shared that they had siblings, aunts or uncles who were gay. But most importantly, two of the students "came out" as a gay man and a lesbian. It seemed that our presence and the subsequent discussion helped create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance that allowed these two to share this aspect of safety and acceptance that allowed these two to share this aspect of themselves which otherwise might have remained hidden from their colleagues.

Every Speakout volunteer should feel encouraged that our efforts to talk openly and simply about being gay and lesbian does have an impact now. Our educational efforts will also have a cumulative impact over time. And, I believe that the changes I have seen in the past 25 years indicate that we can look forward to a future in which it will be understood that our lives as gay men and lesbians are no more or less

extraordinary than those of heterosexuals. A future where it will be accepted, without fanfare, that we are just another color in the rainbow of God's creation.

■

Dick Harrison

Caribou, Aroostook County

A "Reclaiming Our Faith" workshop was held in Caribou September 18th at the United Methodist Church. There were about two dozen people in attendance. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased at the number of church people there, including some clergy. It gave me hope that perhaps when the next referendum occurs that deals with non-discrimination/sexual orientation, some of these clergy will actually "speak out" from their pulpits in support of the amendment to the Maine Human Rights Act; too many remained silent the last time.

I was the only Speak Out person to present, and it was the first time that my "hook" elicited a question! People were truly interested in finding out more about gay people and the types of subtle -- and not so subtle -- discrimination we face every day. As a small business owner and member of the Board of Directors of the Caribou Chamber of Commerce, I oftentimes feel like the "token queer" in town, but on the other hand I hope that when people are faced with homophobic comments, they think of me as the target. Putting a face on intolerance is so important (which is why I feel that Speak Out is the most

effective thing going in Maine today).

I hope that beyond having a list of who was in attendance, there is an effort to bring these people -- and more -- together for a second discussion. If something like this were to happen quarterly, or even just twice a year, it would do a great deal to ease people's concerns and improve their comfort levels when talking about homosexuality.

A "Reclaiming Our Faith" in Aroostook County is important, since we seem to have a homophobic reputation as a result of the terrible February referendum vote. In addition to Speak Out there is a Safe Aroostook group working to deal with all types of intolerance; it was an act of anti-semitism which brought focus to this issue here, not homophobia. People are more willing to speak against religious and racial discrimination than they are willing to speak against homophobic discrimination.

■

Joe Hanslip

Springdale, York County

On the evening of May 10th, Jonathan Lee, Rosemary Guptill and I met at Portsmouth, New Hampshire to attend a meeting of the Seacoast Gay Men. We were invited to attend to give them some information about the Maine Speakout Project. Jonathan decided that the best way to inform them was for him to give some background on the Project and for Rosemary and I to conduct ourselves as we would presenting before any group and then answer

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questions. Obviously, we were “preaching to the choir” and there were no hardball questions but it was a good experience.

I related my experience of coming to terms with being gay in my early twenties despite having had a feeling that “something was different” far earlier in my life yet not having an inkling of what that was beyond being different and knowing I was “the only one.” Many in the audience could relate to that experience whereas when I speak with young people today, that is often not the case and they are surprised to learn that for someone who grew up in suburban and rural locales “gay” was beyond one’s frame of reference.

I spoke of my background spending time since early childhood in rural Maine and its woods, as a former police officer retired due to injuries received in the line of duty, and as an activist in the Republican party and office holder -- making me seem to many to be an “atypical[gay man,” as if there is a “typical” gay man or lesbian.

Rosemary spoke of her experience as a parent of a gay child and what drew her to become involved with Maine Speakout Project, an organization that I have been very impressed with and touched by. We were very well received and it was an excellent event. I am glad to have been a part of the presentation with Rosemary and Jonathan.

Rev. Elizabeth A. Vernon
Caribou, Aroostook County

What a refreshing and honest way to grow in understanding. I consider myself a fairly liberal person, but I needed to hear what turned out to be a joyful expression of SELF at the Maine Speakout/Reclaiming Our Faith event at the Caribou United Methodist Church. The two men who spoke left me with a feeling of having been cleansed again. I don’t know why, but hearing someone’s story FROM THEM, and not someone else, is healing, enlightening, softening/gentling. It was a wonderful time. I appreciated hearing my friend Ron tell his story in a way that let me know why I love him. And the other man’s story was different, in many ways, and so compelling. There was commonness, but, wonderful difference. I could listen all day to people’s stories but somehow, hearing these two brave men who have dedicated their lives to gently allowing me to change, was like the Grace of God. I say “thank you,” to these two and others (who shared short vignettes) who patiently and quietly wait for me to grow. The “speak out” offers so much. The afternoon, eating together, and listening for positive ways to share, was a great time.

Jenson Steel

North Vassalboro, Kennebec County
“Ex-Kiwanian Comes out to Rotary: My experience speaking to the Manchester Rotary Club”

“Hello, this is what a gay ex-Kiwanian looks like,” I said as I spun around in a circle. My attempt at breaking the ice with a group I’d imagined not much different from the Rotary members in my hometown. You know the type: establishment, mostly Republican, God-family & state pro-lifers (men and women) who have been in their shoe boxes so long they’ve forgotten that life could be any different. For the most part, I was right on target. I put myself in their place easily enough imagining that I was at my weekly Kiwanis luncheon listening to a guest speaker. It was a huge irony slapping me in the face so I took it by the horns and enjoyed the hell out of it. My goal was to keep things on a level they could identify with and to keep the “good-old-boy” camaraderie alive while doing it.

I chose to let them know my reasons for so candidly exposing myself to them dealt with my feelings as an adolescent wondering what I was. I let them know that without the proper role models, a young man in high school who isn’t a “fag” yet feels more romantic with men than women can consider suicide his only option. I let them know some of what I went through in order to tie in their feelings concerning their children and grandchildren in school now. “How many kids do we have to watch kill themselves because they don’t fit in to the “normal” scheme of things? That

was my soapbox moment. I know my tendency to preach and I know it’s not something to do as an MSOP speaker, so I do it in one sentence and get it out and over with quickly, hoping to make some small impact.

I enjoyed the experience; I felt as if they were listening with compassion, ever so lightly. My co-speaker and I were approached by a few individuals out in the parking lot after the luncheon ended. They shared their appreciation and personal feelings with us. I took from the experience an awareness that I’d become much more comfortable with being “gay,” even with some “good-old-boys.” And that’s really what it’s all about, isn’t it? being comfortable with diversity.

Doug Cruger

Old Orchard Beach, York County

My Speakout partner and I were recently asked to participate in one of Speakout’s return engagements - a training event for residential counselors and assistants at the University of Southern Maine, Gorham campus. The university has been using Speakout training as a way of sensitizing students and faculty to issues of diversity and inclusivity. Both Linda and I jumped at the chance to be part of USM’s residential coordinators’ training week. What we did not know until a few days before the event was that public television Channel 10 had been invited to videotape our presentations for use as

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background for an upcoming live call-in program on the subject of violence against minorities.

Linda and I arrived a few minutes before "showtime," were greeted by our hosts and introduced to 32 residential assistants and their trainers. Linda told her story. I followed. Then we opened up the session for questions. Some questions were curious: "Have you ever been discriminated against?" Some questions were personal: "What can I say to my from-the-old-school grandmother about the fact that some of my closest friends are homosexual?" "How can I have gay friends without being labeled gay myself?"

The surprising turn of the evening was that several students, two of whom had come out during earlier training sessions, were able to talk openly with their classmates and leaders about their own fears and concerns about being openly gay. One trainee wondered when would be the time to tell the students in her charge that she was a lesbian. In turn, many students at the training event expressed determination that USM would be a campus where diversity is honored and respect for difference valued. May it be so.

It was a privilege for Linda and I to spend time with the USM students and their advisors. We even forgot that the video cameras were even rolling.

Ron Hersom

Bangor State Venue Coordinator

My Trip to Western Mountains

As I entered the driveway for Telstar High School in Bethel, sleet began pelting my windshield. It was a cold, raw morning in the western mountain region of Maine as I began the first of four days meeting school administrators, business leaders and clergy. I wondered if the weather foretold of my upcoming encounters.

These meetings had been planned over the last two months. Calling and networking with my itinerary and the schedules of nearly 30 people in upper Oxford and Franklin Counties. My 4 day sojourn would take me from Bethel to the Rumford/Mexico area to Wilton to Farmington to Kingfield. The meetings I had were not consistent with the harsh, frigid crystals mounting up on the car - these meetings were warm, inviting, encouraging and hopeful. Not only hopeful about where each leader or organization was on the issue of sexual orientation, but excited that someone from the Maine Speakout Project took the time to come and talk with them. Asked them questions about what was going on in their community and shared ideas how MSOP might be a resource for them.

I went to these meetings with a handful of contacts and hopes for more. What I received was opened doors to other persons throughout the region and



commitments to plan speakouts and workshops in the area. MSOP hopes to plan more types of trips similar to this around the state. The more we can communicate face to face with community leaders around the state, the better able and more successful we can be having opportunities to share personal experiences through having more speakouts.

Peter Rees

Ellsworth, Hancock County

Jonathan Lee, Jeff L'Heureux, youth worker at Portland Outright, and I, representing GLSEN Downeast, attended and presented a workshop at the annual three-day conference of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network in Atlanta at the beginning of October.

In addition to taking part in some useful and sometimes inspiring trainings and information exchanges, we had good fun. Several hundred GLSEN folks from all over the US and Canada were there, including a good contingent of young people of every skin color (and some with glorious hair colors).

Our presentation to about thirty people included Jonathan describing MSOP, the "Walk with the One You Love" events, and the Safe Schools Collaborative; Jeff describing Outright and its enormous importance to young GLBT&Q people; and me describing the progress over eighteen years of one

rural Maine high school from a position of denial and indifference to a position of active insistence on being safe and welcoming to all varieties of students and staff, explicitly including sexual minorities.

Audience discussion was vigorous and eager. People wanted to know how to break through resistance to change in rural areas. Their evaluations of our presentation were uniformly highly positive, and the most frequent comment was that our workshop deserved a whole day rather than the ninety minutes allotted. It is important for us to know that our work here in Maine, which we may think of as "on the fringe" of national developments, is actually ground-breaking and inspiring to others when they hear about it.

Directors Report

Walking with the One You Love

Watching the news coverage of the June 20 "Walk with the One You Love," I was very impressed with how sympathetic and extensive this coverage was -- and on the five and six and ten o'clock news of every station in Southern Maine. Both the commentary and the images chosen conveyed respect and understanding. I want to thank the news staffs, especially at Channels 6 and 8, for their good work.

The Walk began as a very personal experience of one gay couple, Elliott Cherry and Chris Chenard, who after a summer trip to Provincetown, began walking hand-in-hand on Baxter Boulevard to affirm their right to show their love in public in their home town. Elliott made his Provincetown-Portland experience the subject of his speakouts and eventually their example inspired other MSOP board members - gay and straight - to organize our first "Walk with the One You Love" in June 1998. Thirty-five people attended and one television station ran a decent report on our fog-drenched event.

This past June, we had 110 participants, all four networks covered the event, and the Mayor declared June 20 "Walk with the One You Love Day" in Portland. Seeing Elliott and Chris and Charley Mitchell and John LaBrie walking hand-in-hand on the six o'clock news made me aware of how these individuals, by stretching themselves to

speaking out publicly, are very fine examples of how MSOP volunteers reach others in the wider community.

"Walk with the One You Love" is valuable because it is open to everyone. It provides an opportunity for the many Mainers who want everyone in their towns to feel safe to be who they are to show an image of the kind of Maine we want to create. Walking helps build awareness that gay people also fall in love, have relationships, create families, and that we deserve the same legal and social supports for our relationships that are available to the majority.

In June 2000, we are sponsoring "Walks with the One You Love" in a number of towns throughout Maine on Father's Day. We encourage you to invite members of your congregation, service club, or civic organization to co-sponsor a local Walk. By walking together we can hasten the day when "respect and understanding among persons of differing sexual orientations" will be a fact of life we can take for granted.

Maine Safe Schools Collaborative

We continue our work as a member of the Maine Safe Schools Collaborative to help schools become safe places for all students, staff and families, regardless of sexual orientation. Last Spring we sent copies of the first *Maine Safe Schools Resource Guide* to every principal in Maine. It included a letter from Education Commissioner Albanese that

encouraged principals to call upon the organizations listed in the guides when planning staff trainings this fall.

Well, no principals called but that doesn't mean we won't call them! On October 23, we held a meeting of the Maine Safe Schools Collaborative in Augusta to begin creating a statewide collaborative that can advance our common goals. We had representatives from 11 counties and, as they say, the energy was good. We have invited two veterans of the pioneering Safe Schools movement in Massachusetts, Jeff Perrotti and Kim Westheimer, to talk with us on December 11 in Waterville about how they achieved safe schools legislation and to offer their advice and counsel. Please join us for this important discussion.

The Way Life Should Be...

The most inspiring moment for me at the GLSEN national conference in Atlanta last month was listening to a high school senior from Massachusetts tell his story of coming out to his teachers, parents, football coach and team members last spring. "C" was -- and still is -- co-captain of the football team at a public high school. Last year he felt it was necessary to be honest and open about being gay, so he sought out teachers he felt would be sympathetic: a biology teacher, the faculty advisor to his school's Gay/ Straight Alliance, his mother, then father, then football coach.

While listening to C's story at a workshop entitled "Sports, School

Culture, and Homophobia" organized by Jeff Perrotti and Pat Griffin, we the audience kept expecting that he was about to get to the "bad part" but he never did! In fact, he told us that just the night before, returning on the bus from a game, the team had decided to sing a song in C's honor: within seconds the entire football team was singing "YMCA" by the Village People -- and no, this is not the film sequel to "In and Out," but a true story. Listening, I thought that every school in Maine could benefit by having a Gay/Straight alliance and that C's brave honesty -- and the decency of response of his peers -- is the kind of change in school and community climate that we hope to achieve in Maine, and soon!



Thank You...

Steve Katona, president, College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, for hosting our July 17th fundraiser. **Carol Bult**, **Tamara Duff**, **Robert Taylor**, & **David Einhorn** for speaking.

Juliet & Dr. Robert Kellogg, for hosting our October 17th event in Bangor.

Rick & Beth Warren, for co-sponsoring the 10/17 Bangor event.

Attorney General Andrew Ketterer for speaking at the 10/17 event.

Libra Foundation for their grant of \$5,000, the **Richard Nathan Anti-Homophobia Trusts** for a grant of \$5,000 for "America Speaks Out," and the **Governor's Children's Cabinet-Region 1** for \$5,000 for the Maine Safe Schools Resource Collaborative.

Carmen Verandah, Bar Harbor, for the September benefit show for MSOP featuring the dueling divas of the North, **Miss Lewanda** and **Highly Contagious**.

Tamara Duff for holding her own without a problem when asked to speak at the Miss Lewanda Show. If the dueling divas had her scared, she betrayed not a quiver!

Linda Monko for designing the "Walk with the One You Love" tee-shirts and invitations for summer and fall special events.

Starbucks Coffee & Ben & Jerry's for their treats at the end of the "Walk with the One You Love."

FYI ...

Upcoming Training:

If you would like to be part of the statewide team of leaders preparing for next year's referendum campaign on our civil rights law, please consider participating in the campaign leadership development training being sponsored by the Maine Diversity Alliance of MLGPA, the Maine Coalition for equal Rights, and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. The training will occur near Augusta, January 6-9. For full information, please contact Dave Fleischer at 212-605-9830 ext. 12 or email him at DaveFlei@aol.com.

Job Opening at MaineShare. This cooperative fundraising consortium consisting of over 30 statewide non-profit organizations is seeking an Executive Coordinator by March 1st (or earlier). The position requires 40 hours a week with some flexibility. Salary is negotiable and based on experience. Offices are in Portland and Augusta. For more information, contact MaineShare at 622-0105.



Upcoming Events

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November 6

Saturday, "Reclaiming Our Faith," First Congregational UCC, Kittery, 1-5 pm.

November 13

Saturday, Speaker Training, First Parish Congregational Church, Saco, 9-4.

November 20

Saturday, Speaker Training, University of Maine, Orono, 9-4.

December 11

Saturday, Maine Safe Schools Collaborative with guests Jeff Perrotti and Kim Westheimer from Massachusetts, Waterville, 10-1.

December 17

Friday, Holiday Reception, Charlie Howard Memorial Library, 7 Dana Street, Portland, 5:30-7 pm.

February 5

Saturday, Speaker Training, University of Maine/Presque Isle, 9-4.

*Don't miss these upcoming events...tear this page out
and keep it near your calendar*

How Can You Help?

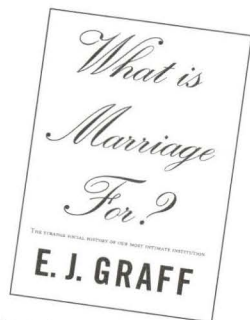
1. You can help us to get invited to do a speakout at your club, church, synagogue, school committee, workplace lunch-and-learn. Contact Ron Hersom, MSOP Venues Coordinator, with names, numbers, and ideas @941-0969; Rhersom@aol.com.
2. Make a year-end tax-deductible contribution to MSOP. If you want to donate stock, you can do so through our A.G. Edwards Brokerage Gift Account #210-260064 by calling 800-424-4452.
3. Get trained to become a speaker.
4. Encourage friends in other states to consider starting a speakout program with our assistance.

Holiday Gift Ideas ...

Make friends and family happy and help MSOP at the same time by giving EVERYONE a Darthe Jennings CD and E.J. Graff's new book, *What is Marriage For? The strange social history of our most intimate institution.*



\$14 (includes shipping)



\$25 (includes shipping)

MSOP County Contacts

For information on MSOP activities in your county, please contact one of the county contacts listed below or the MSOP offices: in Bangor: 941-0969, rhersom@aol.com; in Portland: 879-0480, msoproject@aol.com.

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