

MAJOR MILESTONES

Prejudice on the Gay Front Fades in Alameda

BY MARY EISENHART | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHYLLIS CHRISTOPHER



At the 2004 version of that most Alamedan of all festivities, the Fourth of July Parade, one of the trophies went to a float called The Marriage Carriage. A celebration of same-sex marriage, the carriage was the brainchild of Debra Arbuckle and Sherry Stoll of the Alameda Lesbian Potluck Society, or ALPS. The two married during the heady period following San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom's ordering the county clerks to issue licenses to gay couples (and before the state Supreme Court overruled him and voided the marriage licenses later this summer).

Decked out in fancy wedding garb on a float enhanced by the brainstorm of numerous community members in the days leading up to the 4th, the ALPS members were simply enjoying the occasion and moving along the parade route when they were startled by someone from the reviewing stand chasing after them and waving a trophy.

All in all, the Marriage Carriage marked something of a milestone in the Island's history, and a pleasant sequel to the 2003 parade, which could have been ugly without some timely community intervention.

Ken Werner, former chairman of Alamedans Together Against Hate, a member of the city's Human Relations Commission, recalls that on July 4, 2003, he and fellow ATAH members were festooning the group's trolley with "No Room for Hate in Alameda" banners when he noticed a small, unfamiliar, sign-toting contingent preparing to take its place in the parade.

Their placards expressed a range of conservative political and religious sentiments, with a preponderance of anti-gay messages ("Stop the Gay Davis War on Marriage!!" proclaimed one; "'Gay' Marriage Destroys the Natural Family," added another).

The group, not from Alameda, had registered at the last minute to snag the last, and highly conspicuous, spot for its message, and while there was a fair amount of local consternation, the First Amendment implications were clear: A public event could not exclude participants based on the content of their message.

Thinking fast, Werner huddled with his fellow passengers (including a Dixieland band) and garnered their support for a plan, doubled back and settled comfortably behind the out-of-towners. ATAH "No Room for Hate in Alameda" banners were waving, and members, Werner proudly recalls,

were shouting, "'No room for hate. No room for hate.' We did that all the way through Alameda."

ATAH's rolling cheering section defused what could have been a much nastier situation. "We'd let them go 20 or 30 feet up ahead of us," he says, "and you'd see people's reactions to reading the signs. They'd be all, 'Oh great, what's this one?,' and you could see their faces just draining. And we'd be coming up behind them, 'No room for hate!' and—thunderous applause. So that happened the whole parade route until the end."

Rev. Laura Rose, who would, the following month, become the minister at the venerable First Congregational Church of Alameda (United Church of Christ), recalls being at the parade. "People began to chant, or yell, 'No hate in Alameda! No hate in Alameda!'"

"It was actually very encouraging to me," says Rose, who married her longtime partner, Tina Koeberl, a special education instructor at Encinal High, at a ceremony in Gavin Newsom's office. "I was very sobered by the signs, but I was encouraged by the response."



Five years ago, David Gunderman and Andrew Raskopf (another pair of recent newlyweds) were living in Hayes Valley in San Francisco. "We were fed up with the city," says Gunderman, "with our cars being broken into, the congestion, the lack of parking. We wanted to be in a quieter place that was a true community. I had heard that Alameda was just what we were looking for."

So one weekend, he persuaded his skeptical partner to look at houses on the Island. The pair had just embarked on their tour with Kane & Associates real estate broker Jerry Nussbaum when they drove by a Craftsman just off of Webster and exclaimed, "What about *that* house?!" In short order, they'd made an offer, had it accepted and moved in.

"It was," says Gunderman, "the weekend that totally changed our lives." Before long, the two had left their off-the-Island jobs and found new careers—as real estate agents at Kane & Associates.

From their vantage point at the epicenter of Alameda's real estate boom, the two agree that what's drawing people—of all persuasions—is the same: the (relatively) affordable housing, the weather, the architectural heritage, the tree-lined streets,

the beaches, the proximity to San Francisco. And, most of all, the chance to be part of a close-knit community.

In this, the new arrivals are no different from previous generations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, or LGBT, Alamedans who have found a happy home on the Island, discovered ways to make significant contributions to its daily life and weave tightly woven into its social fabric.

Take Mark Sorenson, who's been here since the mid-'80s—and who, with his partner Tom Spittle, an engineer/scientist at NASA Ames, has achieved sufficiently mainstream status that the couple was featured in an Alameda Power and Telecom advertising campaign. "When I walked down the street," he says of the days when he first arrived, "the shopkeepers would be out sweeping their sidewalks and everyone would say good morning. There was an identity. People knew who you were. There was just that...at-easiness, being here. We felt comfortable. It felt nice. It was like turning back to Mayberry."

Sorenson owns Fabulous on Park Street (formerly Rowack & Wolfe), an 18-year local institution named retail sales business of 2003 by the Alameda Chamber of Commerce. The shop carries all things floral, decorative and gifts, plus its owner offers a wealth of event-planning expertise. Sorenson's shop also houses the Alameda Civic Light Opera's box office, and Sorenson donates space for an ACLU display window. He also enthusiastically supports the Boys and Girls Club and is currently serving as vice president of the board of directors of Alameda Meals on Wheels.

"In life you can be a little fish in a big pond or a big fish in a little pond," Sorenson says. "I wanted to be in a place where I could do some good and be recognized and be of benefit to people. In an area like this—it's small, it's an island, it has its own character—there's a lot of folks doing a lot of stuff you can get involved in. So it did seem like the perfect match for where I wanted to be."

Fellow chamber member Leslie Kringsgold, proprietor of instructional design/video production/project management company Whatever Productions, arrived five years ago after a decade in San Francisco, and tells a similar story. "I felt like I wanted to get more involved in the community. During the previous 10 years in San Francisco, I was always involved in the film and video community, but that was very much my self-interest. So I wanted to really contribute to the community."

Looking for volunteer opportunities, she learned about openings on the city's library board, and, although she then

knew nothing of the history leading up to Measure O and the current ambitious building campaign, libraries had been dear to her heart since she was a child in Florida befriended by the school librarian. She was appointed to her second term as president of the library board this summer.

Not that there haven't been a few rough spots over the years. Like many a small town, Alameda's strong old traditional values, many of its citizens adhere to religions that condemn homosexuality, and from time to time, the tension between the two sides reaches the breaking point.

For years, longtime observers say, Alameda's basic live-and-let-live attitudes prevailed, and its gay and lesbian citizens went about their lives largely unnoticed. Toward the end of

the '80s, an increasingly active gay social scene developed, with events ranging from meetings and potlucks to memorable same-sex dances. In the early '90s, then-mayor Bill Withrow issued a proclamation honoring the contributions of Alameda's LGBT citizens and proclaiming June as Gay Pride Month—a pretty standard proclamation for Bay Area cities by that time. What may have seemed like a no-brainer to the mayor, however, soon turned into a major political hot potato and generated weeks of hostilities in the letters column of the local newspapers. So, the next year,

when newly elected Mayor Ralph Appenzano was in office, confronted by the certain prospect of a new opinion, he deferred the decision on the pride proclamation to the city council—which voted it down.

"That," Werner says, "was the Stonewall of Alameda" (the reference is to the 1969 riots in New York widely considered the beginning of the gay rights movement.) The San Francisco Chronicle was soon all over the story, poking fun at Alameda for its backward ways. Locals of all ages promptly were incensed, and heated words flew from all sides.

From the various loose gay and lesbian social networks around Alameda sprang Out on the Island, a political action committee formed in the wake of the proclamation uproar. OOTI soon became known as a considerable political force. It wielded influence on the clockwork-like arrival of the pride proclamation each year thereafter and other more meaningful gay-lesbian issues. In later years, OOTI dissolved as a formal organization and is no longer a PAC, but it continues life as a community resource, carrying on its Web site interviews with political candidates, bulletin board postings. Over the last couple of decades, "We've gone from no exist-

RESOURCES

ALAMEDAS TOGETHER AGAINST HATE (510) 749-5811

OUT ON THE ISLAND (OOTI)
www.outontheisland.org/index.html

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF ALAMEDA (UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST) 1912 Central (at Chestnut)
(510) 522-6012

ALAMEDA LESBIAN POTLUCK SOCIETY Debra Ashballe
(510) 522-8312, ebra4000@aol.com



Mark Sprentzen, left, at his shop Fabulous on Park Street, with partner Tom Squire. They were featured in an Alameda Power and Telecom advertising campaign.

ity in the community to controversy over our existence to becoming leaders in the community," says Deb Knowles, who maintains the QUIL network list.

During a particularly nasty interlude in the mid-'90s, Werner was recruited to the city's Social Services Human Relations Board on the theory that it badly needed a representative of the gay and lesbian communities. Appointed by then-Mayor Applegate, he's now nearing the end of his second term and has made hate crimes his particular focus.

"My parents were Holocaust survivors," he says. "So I understand hate and I understand ghosts, and I understand a lot about both hidden and overt racism, prejudice, that kind of stuff. So I really wanted to work on the issue of hate and intolerance." Also, he has a master's degree in organizational development, so he worked with some fellow board members to put together a subcommittee they called Alamedans Together, later Alamedans Together Against Hate. The group's

mission was twofold: to establish a system (the Hate Intolerance Response Team) so that all the relevant organizations in the community could quickly meet and respond to a particular hate crime as it occurred, and to proactively get out the word about hate crimes—and resources for dealing with them—into the community.

HIRT has been set in motion a few times over the years, the first in response to a race-related incident, and most recently, proactively, to head off potential trouble in the wake of 9/11.

Since the days of matrimonial euphoria in San Francisco, some gay and lesbian Alamedans report the occasional encounter with overt homophobia. Keonigsd, who's also president of one of Alameda's six Teamsters clubs and not one to make an issue of being gay, says she was recently startled by a speaker who said something like, "I think of marriage as sex, and the idea of two men being married repulses me."

"He literally said that in a public place," says Kronegold, "and I was kind of aghast. You're not really supposed to criticize the content at Toastmasters presentations, but it made me wonder how people would have reacted had he made racist remarks."

Then there was the bronchitis when Betty Gladden of the Garratt Mansions allegedly turned down a lesbian couple who wanted to hold their wedding ceremony there, saying she didn't believe in same-sex marriage and wouldn't have one on the premises. (Says Mrs. Gladden: "We haven't actually turned away a same-sex wedding. Nor do we have a policy regarding same-sex marriages. A woman called and asked about wedding sites and in asking inquired if I had a problem with a same-sex ceremony. I did tell her I believed marriage was for a man and a woman, and yes, I felt uncomfortable with a same-sex ceremony and it would be difficult for me to participate and facilitate.")

"Before Gavin Newsom started doing this at city hall, gay marriage wasn't a big issue in this household," says Kronegold. "But now that it's in the news every day, it's hard to know that right in your little community this is happening. I feel very comfortable with the people that have come into my life. I love the community, but in the last few months, I've been questioning how much of an open community this really is."

"There's always going to be some homophobia," says COTT's Knowles pragmatically. "While we're generally accepted, there is a select portion of the community that would rather we didn't exist. And they have the right to feel that way. It's a very tough issue."

But in general, the consensus is that things are much better.



One of the other life-changing things that happened to Gundersen and Ruskopf, aside from their transformation to 1 Fratsman-Swelling real estate salesmen, was adopting first Katie, now 5, and later her brother, Jake, now 2.

And with their children come a whole new set of issues that are further complicated by both parents being fathers, Ruskopf says. "Ultimately, it's harder for us to raise children here than it would be in San Francisco where same-sex culture is more prevalent. In Alameda, we're an anomaly. But living here is worth it. It's such a kid-friendly community, and as people get to know us, our prejudice and associated fears disappear."

"It has also been exciting for us to meet more and more Alamedans in the same situation," adds Gundersen.

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"We're forming a community with playgroups, picnics and play dates so that we can all share a network of support and information."

At the First Congregational Church of Alameda, which celebrates the one hundredth anniversary of its sanctuary at Central and Chestnut this year, building bridges among people who are different is a core value. In the '80s, the congregation took the bold step of declaring itself "open and affirming." The church bulletin reads: "We believe that all persons are equally loved, judged and respected by God. We welcome all people regardless of age, race, marital status, sexual orientation, ethnic background, physical or economic condition." Over the last decade or so, gay and lesbian couples and their children have found a welcome among their straight contemporaries, the elders and the families that have been in the congregation for generations. The church has chosen a lesbian minister and given hearty rounds of applause to the same-sex couples returning inmarried from San Francisco (though, Rev. Laura Rose

says, some members may have been startled when their minister and her partner did likewise). And it has been home to the actual wedding of two women who have been together for 27 years and are raising three children.

On Mother's Day, after the service, the congregation, from seniors to toddlers, gathers for snacks, punch and conversation. Outside in the play yard, a gaggle of moms,

most of whom have joined First Congregational in the last few years, chats and watches as their toddlers, velping with glee, clamber on the climbing structure. There's general agreement that one of the church's main attractions, for the devout and for those who generally don't regard themselves religious, is its inclusiveness of all kinds of families. After all, one lesbian mom points out, statistically the kids are very likely to grow up straight, and it's hardly good for them to see only gay families—it's important to see every possible familial configuration and be tolerant of the combinations.

"What we all love about the church is that it's so diverse," says author and Bay Area Island mom Michèle Espinoza, who joined the church recently, along with her 3-year-old son, and is helping organize the church's fledgling Moms' Group. "There's this great feeling of acceptance. There are women from families who have been in the church for 30-some years, and they bring something different than what some of us bring who are new, and I think there's a lot of respect for that."

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One recurring theme that comes up in conversation with both longtime residents and recent arrivals in the Island's gay community is that if you pitch in for Alameda, Alameda pitches in for you. "It doesn't matter if you're black or Asian or gay," says Sorensen. "That's not the issue. The issue is we're all out there helping each other, and as long as we keep helping each other, as long as you extend yourself and put yourself out there, then you get back what you put in."

Case in point: just at the crucial point in February 2004, when Fabulous was moving into its new quarters on Park Street and things could not have been more chaotic, Sorensen's mother fell seriously ill, and he had to rush to her bedside before she passed on. Friendly colleagues and neighbors from the mayor on down helped complete the move and then showed up at his mother's funeral. "They weren't there to show support for me as a gay person," Sorensen says. "They were there to support me as a person, and a member of the community, and to pay their respects."

Gunderman says he and Raskopf were the first gay couple in their neighborhood, and while they generally got a warm reception, he felt a frost from a couple of quarters. But over time, he says, "You could really see them warming to us and figuring out, now that they were exposed to a gay couple, that we were actually people they chose to get to know."

"It's a great honor to be part of the community as well," he adds. "It's kind of a two-way street, Alameda. Once it lets you in, it embraces you, I think. It takes a little while, like any other small town, but once people know you love it, you love it like they do, then the doors open."

Adds Raskopf, "It's such an obvious point that it feels almost absurd to say it, but amazingly enough, some people still need to learn that straight, gay, black, white, purple or peka-dotted. It's our humanity that unites us and our diversity that is the spice of life. We love Alameda because it's full of diversity, and we're excited to be part of this evolving community." ■

“WHEN I HAVE AN ASTHMA ATTACK I FEEL LIKE A FISH WITH NO WATER.”

—JESSE, AGE 5



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