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Funding social change since 1967

RESIST

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A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority

June 2002

Talking Politics with Barbara Smith

CAROL SCHACHET

Black feminist, activist and author Barbara Smith recently spoke with RESIST Newsletter editor Carol Schachet about some of the challenges facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of color. Their conversation is included below. A similar conversation, which appears on page 4, occurred with Neena Hemmady.

One of the things that's common about Resist and about yourself is the multi-issue focus. How do you choose to define yourself? And does that matter to you?

SMITH: Objectively I'm African American. I'm female. I'm a lesbian. I come from a working class family, but I am highly educated. And I'm a radical. I'm a socialist and a Black feminist. By Black feminist, I don't mean a feminist who is Black. I mean the politics of Black feminism.

How do these labels impact the way others view you?

SMITH: People see racial and ethnic identifiers as merely being labels. I don't consider it to be a label. I consider it to be a definition or a description of my objective reality, and also my political status and my historical and cultural relationship to White Supremacy and this nation's history.

We don't solve oppression and we don't solve bigotry by not naming ourselves as who we are. That's not the source



Barbara Smith (center) participates at the Lesbian and Gay March on Washington in 1993. Photo by Ellen Shub

of the bigotry. The source of the bigotry is people's narrow and hateful attitudes.

I think that sometimes people who have been exposed to post modern theory and other very academic perspectives also have problems with using accurate labels or identifiers to say who people are in relationship to the power structures and in relationship to their own communities. Even if there was no racism in this country, I would still be a person of African heritage living in the United States.

Does identifying yourself as belonging to a group assume that you must have politics that align with that group's identity politics?

SMITH: As a person who helped to build Black feminism in this country, I use that term to describe myself quite proudly.

And it's probably the shortest definition of who I am because when I say Black feminist, inherent in that is being a radical, is being a socialist, being opposed to capitalism, being opposed to injustice and certainly being opposed to homophobia. If someone thinks by my saying I'm a lesbian, for example, that it means that I'm

a clueless and narrow-minded [LGBT] establishment kind of person who only wants a few rights as opposed to actual justice, then that would be their mistake. They wouldn't think that for long, once they engaged with me or read my writing.

The gay and lesbian movement has focused on what we might call more mainstream concerns like marriage or gays in the military. Are attitudes towards gays and lesbians moving toward greater acceptance?

SMITH: Maybe for the White ones. And that's not to say that people of color are more homophobic, but the widespread public image of somebody gay is somebody White. You have a popular television show called "Will & Grace." I don't know that

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there's ever been a significant person of color as a part of their little narrow-minded, upper class New York city clique. But it's New York! "Will and Grace" might as well be a Woody Allen movie. This supposedly groundbreaking show, "Seinfeld" (which *TV Guide* recently picked as the greatest TV show of all times) and Allen's movies are all depictions of an all-White fantasy New York City where in fact droves of people of color live and are the majority.

I don't know if there's more acceptance [of LGBT people] or not because I have not heard or read recent statistics about the level of hate violence and hate crimes aimed at LGBT people. I would suspect that they have not diminished in recent years.



Cross-issue organizing was not new at this 1984 Lesbian and Gay Pride march. Photo by Ellen Shub

That's a good marker of where you are objectively: How much physical abuse and violence is aimed at you by society as a way of intimidating everyone who shares that identity. It serves just like lynching as a warning to the rest of us, which means that our lives are not truly respected and we are not truly free.

Do you feel like there's a radical queer movement now?

SMITH: I'm not sure that I would say that there is because we don't really have a means of communicating with each other and consistently working together. I think it's very hard to have a movement if the majority of participants in that movement have no way of knowing of each other's existence. There is a lesbian and gay left, as we've called ourselves at different

Black feminism was an historical breakthrough because it did allow people to bring all of their identities to the table.

points. There are definitely those of us who still have radical politics—and not all of us are middle-aged either. Some of the people who have the best and most multi-issued and principled politics are people in their 20s and 30s, even some people who are in their teens.

I get to meet so many wonderful and dynamic activists, LGBT people of color around the country as well as some White anti-racists, activists and allies. I see a lot of evidence that there are people doing remarkable and wonderful work who are out as LGBT while doing that work. Often, they're not doing work in a LGBT movement context.

The Black Radical Congress in 1998 had some great LGBT workshops and discussions and caucuses. At least half of the people who were at the Congress who were LGBT were not doing political work in an LGBT movement context at all. They were working on housing and immigrant issues and economic issues, union organizing, and violence against women and you name it—all kinds of different issues. At least half of them were not paying attention to the mainstream LGBT movement. And I have to say I'm not really involved in the mainstream movement at this point either.

This is the kind of multi-issue organizing you spoke of before in which the people who are carrying out the work as organizers have many identities that aren't necessarily addressed in the organizing campaigns.

SMITH: That's why Black feminism and

the feminism of women of color was such a new political direction. It was an historical breakthrough because it did allow people to bring all of their identities to

the table and organize out of that and to look at the subtleties of what those various identities meant for a particular issue.

What kinds of issues might bring people together as radical or progressive activists?

SMITH: I would like to encourage an ongoing analysis and practice that allows one to make connections amongst and between issues even if you choose one or two to concentrate on. In other words, I wish that we could encourage people to give more thought to how all of the pieces fit together. As a friend of mine says, "connect the dots." I wish we could encourage

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ILLEGITIMATE AUTHORITY
Funding social change since 1967

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people to do that frequently and not be hostile or contemptuous or dismissive of people's putting their energies where they feel the need to put them.

If people worked from a multi-issued, multi-racial perspective—whether it be quality public education or anti-globalization or police brutality, LGBT rights and fighting violence against LGBT people, whatever the issues are—if you were doing it from a multi-issue perspective, you would then be open to at least being supportive of and hearing about what other people are involved with as well.

You would also continually expand your understanding of how the power structure “connects the dots” to keep us all in our supposed places. How, for example the attacks on Muslims and Arab Americans since September 11 are occurring in a context of anti-immigrant policies and racism that were in place long before September 11.

What would be that issue that would get us all out into the streets? I would imagine generally that it would be economic. The ruling class has done everything possible to divide workers and poor people from each other. One of the major ways they've done that is through race and racism. Parts of the working class see other parts of the working class as enemies. Economic issues cut across sexual, gender, racial and ethnic and nationality identities.

Do you see there being any unique challenges for LGBT persons of color that folks are facing?

SMITH: We have always faced incredible challenges because, first of all, we're not supposed to exist. We are marginalized in at least two different contexts. We're marginalized by the White bourgeois mainstream LGBT movement and leadership. And we're also marginalized within our own communities of color either by being truly vilified and ostracized or by being ignored and erased.

I feel there's a way that LGBT people of color have never been taken seriously by the rest of the LGBT movement or by progressive movements generally. If we were, we'd have a different movement by now.

My freedom and my liberation come from the ground up, and it comes from people working with integrity for a world of peace not violence.

Not just the cosmetic tokenism thing—what I call the “all the colors in the crayon box approach.” It would be inherently different. We would understand how a part of our work as LGBT activists would logically connect, for example, to the situation of sweatshop laborers both here and in other countries. We would grasp that in order to achieve LGBT freedom we need to work for justice and peace everywhere. The LGBT movement would be a visible part of the effort to stop this government's war against human beings all around the world.

The mainstream and conservative

sources are here. The resources are being degraded and exploited for the profit of a few, but there is enough to go around if private greed was not what was most defended.

What keeps you going as an activist and a thinker?

SMITH: Knowing that I'm not doing it by myself is extremely important to me. That's one of the reasons I love reading the *Resist Newsletter*. It's like a little jolt 10 times a year, letting me know that I'm not just this voice crying in the wilderness, which I sometimes feel very much like. I've always felt political optimism because I know my history. There are historical moments particularly for people of African

Attacks on Muslims and Arab Americans since September 11 are occurring in a context of anti-immigrant policies and racism that were in place long before September 11.

LGBT people who get to be in the media and determine agendas and get to write for the *New York Times* on a regular basis, et cetera are satisfied with a few crumbs. They're happy to be hanging out with Bush or Clinton or whoever it is in power and never look at the blood that is not just dripping from these leaders' hands, but is gushing out of the doors of those halls of power. I'm not interested in working with people who have that much blood on their hands. Those people are not going to help me. They never have. I know that's not where my freedom and my liberation come from. It comes from the ground up, and it comes from people working with integrity for a world of peace not violence, and food to eat and places to live and water to drink and an environment that's not killing every single living, breathing entity. We could have a decent world if some people decided to prioritize that, because I believe the re-

heritage living in what became the United States that are actually more dire than those we face now. Black slaves did a great deal to alleviate and alter their status and their situation. If we never ran away, if we never poisoned slave masters, if we never learned how to read in a clandestine fashion, even if we never did any of those things, just the mere fact that we physically survived was an act of courage.

Knowing the history of people who have fought and continue to fight for decent, humane lives with generosity, with compassion, with imagination, with humor, with all the things that make it worthwhile to be a person, that keeps me going.

Carol Schachet edits the Resist Newsletter, where she also asks for money. Please send some to Resist, 259 Elm Street, Somerville, MA 02144.

Identity Politics, Ideology and Change

Talking with Activist Neena Hemmady

CAROL SCHACHET

Neena Hemmady is a 29-year-old co-founder of Khuli Zaban, a Chicago-based organization of South Asian and West Asian Les-Bi-Trans women. She is also a tenacious organizer and radical thinker, who spoke with Resist Newsletter editor Carol Schachet about her perspectives on identity politics, coalition-building and social change.

How does your involvement in various communities influence your activism?

HEMMADY: Being able to name my identity is very powerful. Being able to say that I am a lesbian in spaces where people would never expect to hear it carries a lot of weight. It does something to jar people's consciousness, because it never would have occurred to them that a lesbian could be doing this work, or that a lesbian could be part of this space in a visible way. For that reason, identity politics is important because we at least have a language to name ourselves.

I generally say that I am a South Asian lesbian woman. I usually say that I am a radical or progressive woman to denote where my politics lie. It's very important to name what those different aspects of my identity are because they are invisible in mainstream society.

These identities are a starting point, and then you can't make any assumptions beyond there. Just because we have identity groups and we make connections as people that are coming from oppressed identities or common experience, that does not suddenly mean that we all agree about what kind of world we want to live in. All South Asian lesbian/bisexual/transgender women do not share the same politics. It is important to name what is invisible, and to have a political ideology that goes hand-in-hand with that.

What do you mean by identity politics?

HEMMADY: To me, identity politics specifically focus on the aspects of a person's identity that inform their experi-



South Asian queer activists parade at Boston Pride. Photo by Ellen Shub

ences and how they move through the world. It helps us define and name aspects of our identities that are essentially oppressed. It helps us understand certain common characteristics about race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation and class—these are some of many aspects that make up a person's identity. One's identity make-up will give access into certain spaces, or leave us out of certain spaces. It's really only taking us to the starting point from which we need to work, because the world is made up of people who are different from one another. We need to understand what oppression means in relation to our identities.

Once we have the starting point, what happens next?

HEMMADY: Organizing. Let me put it to you this way: I think that there still is such a thing as identity politics. It's critical that people name problems and name issues and name oppressions related to the multiple aspects of our identities. However, now that we've named and identified problems, we have to start thinking about organizing around them, and realizing that these problems are essentially connected. Much of this is already happening—but I see the need for more. We need to work more strategically, to build alliances amongst all oppressed peoples, and to start thinking internationally as we do our work.

So identity is a starting point, but the

issues are much broader than that, which includes coming together across identities?

HEMMADY: Cross-identity organizing is essential to move forward. You can't think that we've gotten somewhere because we have a roomful of South Asian lesbian and bisexual and transgender people. That's not the end-all-be-all. That's a starting point. Identity politics

gives us the space and the breathing room to deal with some of our internalized oppression. It's essential that we have some language to talk about the humiliation, fear, and repression that we face daily. However, identity politics has also been dangerous. I think all of us as progressive people, no matter what your identity is, need to understand that the issues that get brought up will get co-opted by the forces in power that have a vested interest to keep societies static. There are people that benefit greatly from having society set up in this way. And these are the richer, more powerful influences of this country.

Is one of the limits of identity politics dividing groups that might otherwise work together for their common interest?

HEMMADY: I think that there are some dangers. General society and therefore the media present many negative images and stereotypes about each oppressed identity. We internalize some of those messages and we start to divide amongst ourselves. For example, South Asian folks may have a lot of conflicts with African-American folks because of lies that are fed to us from the media. Oftentimes the roots of these oppressions are the same. It's up to us to be able to break down those lies and be able to start working together in coalition.

The diversity and multi-cultural movement sponsored by corporate America pre-

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sents another challenge. Corporate America can have commercials and slogans that “celebrate” diversity and give the appearance that there is some movement while keeping the structure the same. It just gives a slightly different face to it, basically corporatizing identity politics for the benefit of the existing structure.

You’re making a distinction between diversity—meaning perhaps the colors of the faces around the room—and the real distribution of political power.

HEMMADY: Diversity absolutely does not equal meaningful and more equal distributions of political power and wealth.

Is there a radical queer movement anymore?

HEMMADY: There are radical queer people in every movement that exists and who are involved in a variety of struggles. To be a radical means to look at the root cause of a problem or issue or oppression. Radical people want to get to the basis of the problem. Inherently, when you’re looking at root causes, you can’t help but be multi-issue because you can’t help but address race and class and sexism and the military industrial complex and the growth of prisons and the criminalization of youth. You can’t help but address all of those things because all of those things are affecting our collective communities as oppressed people. There are radical queers in all of these movements.

Radical queers—along with other radical people of color and radical people of any identity—need to start learning how to work together in a more strategic, open, outright way that is based on agreement on like-ideologies. I would like to see more strategic alliances with other oppressed people that are based on political ideology as opposed to based on merely identity politics. Groups like the Audre Lorde Project in New York City are excellent examples of radical queer people of color doing amazing things for their own communities.



Activists from the AFL-CIO join queer organizers at the 1987 Lesbian and Gay March on Washington. Photo by Ellen Shub

Do you think LGBT people of color confront any unique challenges?

It’s critical that, as a united force, we challenge those institutions and power structures that systematically oppress people based on their identity.

HEMMADY: Yes. Barbara Smith got me involved in an initiative to bring together many radical LGBT folks of color. All of us across the different movements in which we work deal with rampant homophobia.

For example, as a member of Khuli Zaban organizing against the war [against terrorism] or on immigration issues, when I say something as a lesbian woman in a lot of the communities that I think of as home, there is such incredible homophobia. Organizations like Khuli Zaban have to strategize to start forming coalitions and alliances with people in our own communities, in order to speak to the homophobia issue. I feel sometimes like there is no room to move when homophobia is staring me down from members of my own South Asian community.

Do you find that you can speak as a woman or a South Asian, but not as a Lesbian?

HEMMADY: Exactly. In the communities that I run in, the minute that I identify

myself as a lesbian, I encounter an immediate lack of access and certain demonizing of LGBT people. Likewise, in some LGBT communities the concerns of people of color or poor people never even enter the discussion. It would help to have movements based on progressive, political ideology that would bring different factors and different identities to the table as equal partners. That’s

critical. It’s also critical that, as a united force, we challenge those institutions and power structures that systematically oppress people based on their identity.

One of the key things in this way is the use of allies. For example, LGBT people of color specifically need White LGBT people to stand up and challenge racism, to say that they will not accept racist principles or practices in the organizations that they are a part of. I think that allies are going to play an increasingly large role in this work because multi-issue organizing is about being able to build strategic alliances.

Do you have anything specifically that you’re hoping that White allies will do?

HEMMADY: White people need to work with the people of color in their communities to form relationships, to ask people of color what is needed. Every community needs something different. For example, here in Chicago a group called the Queer White Allies Against Racism (QWAAR) has formed from the Color Triangle Coalition. The Color Triangle Coalition emerged to address issues of racism in the LGBT community here in Chicago. QWAAR basically got together a study group to specifically talk about White skin privilege. They met as White people and discussed text and sought resources from people of color to educate themselves, which I think was very important.

In terms of building alliances, those with privilege need to 1) question their privilege, and 2) ask how they can use their privilege to help those that are, basically, being screwed over by the powers-that-

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be. Allies need to realize that mainstream LGBT concerns might not embrace the real needs of LGBTs of color and lower-income folks. When we think about agenda-setting, and when we think about strategizing as a movement, we need to ask these questions: how does that affect women, people of color, poor people, transgender folk? How does this agenda take into account the big picture of LGBT society versus just the narrow, visible portion that usually gets the attention, benefits and resources.

In a way, it goes to the question of how is what I'm doing part of a significant broad movement for social change, instead of just helping myself and making my life more comfortable?

HEMMADY: Asking the question is critical. Most people with privilege don't even think about asking that question. It's not part of their framework. If we base our movements on political ideology and on that multi-issue organizing framework, it's a no-brainer that you start with those questions, and you start thinking about making

sure that people are included in decision-making from beginning to end. Allies need to make sure that they're not making decisions for the communities that they are supporting, but rather they are in a support role and that decision-making and overall strategy is actually coming from the group of people that's being affected by the issue.

Carol Schachet is the editor and development director of Resist. She also enjoys talking to radical activists.

Coming Out for Change...in Wyoming

JOHN LITTLE

Up until the time of Matthew Shepard's murder in October 1998, most people, including many local residents, never thought of Wyoming as a place where LGBT people would choose to live. In a state best known for its Old West macho cowboy image, everyone was sure there weren't any of "those" here. This was a fairly easy conclusion to make since there isn't a single large city or urban population center in this state of just under 500,000 inhabitants.

There aren't huge numbers of LGBT people in Wyoming, but we are here. According to the 2000 census, there are more than 800 same sex-couples in the Equality State, with five or more couples reported in every county in the state. United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming, Inc. (UGLW), which formed in 1987, is the only statewide LGBT group in the state and has a total membership of only 200.

Organizing for Queer Rights in WY

Queer organizing in Wyoming, just like in most states, has always been difficult at best. Past efforts focused on inclusion within broader social change and progressive movements. They were often invisible above the surface and sometimes even below the surface. Unfortunately our community never had the resources to fully organize itself, and remains largely invisible and disenfranchised.

In the early 1990s, a handful of activists began working at the grassroots level to



UGLW members display the pride flag at their Rendezvous campout. Photo courtesy of UGLW

include LGBT civil rights within the broader context of the human civil rights movement in Wyoming. UGLW, which was primarily a social organization, formed a political action group (PAC) to educate voters and political candidates. A student group, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Association (LGBTa), was formed at the University of Wyoming. A few counties formed grassroots projects to try and build support for progressive issues.

All of these efforts struggled to survive. They were under-funded, and their volunteers were over-worked and tended to burn-out quickly. UGLW's PAC only functioned for a couple of years before being dis-

solved and the organization's leadership returned their focus to the social aspects of the mission statement. The LGBTa, which did receive some funding through the University, often lacked leadership and direction because of the transitional nature of its student members.

Political Action Against Hate Crimes

Shortly after the murder of Matthew Shepard the UGLW created United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming Fund for Social Change, which enabled us to hire a lobbyist to push for bias crimes legislation in the upcoming Wyoming Legislative Session. The Fund for Social Change brought together several progressive and human rights groups from around the state to form the Bias Crimes Coalition. Although the Wyoming Legislature ultimately failed to pass a bias crimes bill in the 1999 General Session, thanks to the efforts of the Coalition, we were able to push the best version of the bill further than ever before and prevented several lesser bias crimes bills from reaching the floor of the House or Senate. This was the first time in Wyoming's history that LGBT issues were represented by a full-time paid lobbyist.

Matt's murder forced all of Wyoming to the realization that LGBT people do, in fact, live here. For a while at least, homosexuality became a regular topic of conversation around the dinner table. The entire state, including the LGBT community and UGLW itself, went through a "coming out" process as a result. We realized that in order to

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affect change UGLW and the LGBT community needed to become much more visible, and we needed to educate people at the most basic levels about what it means to be queer in Wyoming.

UGLW began to build its capacity as an organization in several different ways so that we could eventually build and sustain the capacity of the LGBT community in Wyoming. Since November of 1998 we have sent 18 member/volunteers to National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference to learn about community organizing and political issues. We have also helped to send several volunteers to other national and regional conferences for further training on community organizing, fundraising, and a variety of social change issues.

UGLW hired its first full-time staff person and established an office in Cheyenne during 1999. Within a year we added a part-time assistant in order to meet the increased demands of a growing organization. Our tiny office had become the first LGBT community center in a state without so much as a single gay or lesbian bar.

We began offering local support groups around the state. First, "SafeSpaces" and later, "Rainbow Rooms" were created to provide safe gathering places for the LGBT community. In addition, UGLW's annual social events, Rendezvous (a five-day campout in a nearby forest), Casino Night, and Spring Fling give us the opportunity to celebrate our culture and come together in a safe, friendly environment. All of these program activities serve to bring our community together and provide UGLW with the access needed to organize in a rural and often isolated environment.

In 2000, UGLW created the Wind River Country Initiative for Youth, a unique alliance of LGBT and non-LGBT people of Native American and Caucasian ancestry working together to further understanding and respect by addressing racism, homophobia, classism and ageism. The Initiative recently achieved one of its primary goals with the establishment of the Wind River Country Chapter of The National Coalition

Matt's murder forced all of Wyoming to the realization that LGBT people do, in fact, live here. Homosexuality became a regular topic of conversation around the dinner table.

Building Institute in Lander, WY.

Last year, we partnered with the Gill Foundation to offer a year-long series of monthly organizational development workshops to non-profit organizations in the Cheyenne and Laramie communities. This resulted in representatives for such diverse groups as domestic violence, substance abuse, arts and humanities, Catholic social services, low-income assistance, health care, HIV/AIDS, minority cultural and UGLW coming together and working at the same table on a regular basis.

Thanks to the financial support of RESIST we have been able to increase the hours for our part-time staff, which in turn relieved some of the workload on the Executive Director. This was an important step as we continue to identify and network with our allies, and build strategic alliances in Wyoming. We have joined the Equality State Policy Center, a state government

accountability group made up of progressive environmental, labor, and cultural organizations. In March of 2002 we joined the Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce in order to begin raising awareness of LGBT issues in the local business community. The reaction when UGLW was introduced as a new member at last month's Chamber Luncheon was priceless! You could have heard a pin drop when they read our mission statement. Afterwards, two business owners came up and sincerely thanked us for being there.

UGLW's leadership believes if we are going to be effective at creating change in Wyoming then we must do it in a way that builds on our commonalities as residents of this state. Learning from mistakes made in the past, UGLW has purposely chosen to focus on long-term strategies rather than short-term results. We are working to make sure we have a place at the table as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. At all levels throughout UGLW we make sure whoever we are communicating with knows that we are a LGBT organization and that we represent a constituency of queer people right here in Wyoming.

John Little is the director of United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming. UGLW received a grant from RESIST last year. For more information, contact them at PO Box 6837, Cheyenne, WY 82003; www.uglw.org.

PRIDE! on the Frontier

KARL OLSON

In his essay "The Glacier Principle," Montana author and wilderness activist Rick Bass writes: "What interests me is the point where a glacier, having invested decades in patient endurance, finally gains enough overburden to metamorphose into a slippery, living fluid and begins flowing down the mountain: carving a new world, setting new rules."

He could very well be referring to the valley where I live. It was once submerged under a vast lake—200 miles long—that was held at bay by a ring of mountains and a dam of ice. Twelve thousand years ago the glacial lake broke free and tore across

the Columbia plain for the ocean. In the process, some of the West's most stunning features were carved. Rivers were altered. Today, I can hike up a nearby mountain and survey the Missoula Valley's grid of putty-colored houses, strip malls, and big box stores. I try to imagine what it must have been like at the moment when a glacial lake tipped the balance and forever changed this landscape.

Bass's glacier metaphor could also describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement for equality in Montana. The pace of change is slow and incremental. Yet we persist: challenging job discrimination, harassment in schools, and the

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second-class status of our families. In 1997 gay and lesbian activists won the right to privacy and the state's sodomy law was repealed (*Gryczan v. State of Montana*). But we've paid dearly for that victory. Year after year, measures for equality are battered by the legislature. Ten years spent working toward the same goals seem like a lifetime. For families at risk, youth growing up, and those who are desperate to live life honestly and openly, "patient endurance" is almost too much.

A Land of Extremes

Montana is a land of metaphor and extremes.

Home to 900,000 people thinly scattered over nearly 150,000 square miles—including right-wing militias and artist colonies—Montana is not even rural: by US Census standards it is a frontier state. Per capita, there are more satellite dishes here than anywhere else in the country. Sushi bars in the state (four) outnumber gay bars (two). Isolated by hazardous mountain passes or the closet, many gay and lesbian folks seek solace on the internet.

As with so much of the Intermountain West, the frontier is rapidly filling up. Forests and ranches give way to subdivisions. During construction season, trophy homes climb up into the hills, clamoring for a view.

In winter, wolves come down to the valleys and feed on pet llamas. Demographics seem to change overnight.

The classic Western dictum—live and let live—is eroding under a 20-year cultural migration. Described as "white flight," "Orange County North," or "Californication," this phenomenon has taken many Montanans by surprise. We underestimate the ease with which missionaries have wed evangelical fundamentalism to economic uncertainty. Anti-gay groups (The Montana Family Coalition, Montana Help Our Moral Environment, and Citizens for Decency Through Law), emboldened by the strength of cultural refugees, blame the "homosexual agenda" for everything from AIDS in Africa to increases in home-schooling. Right-wing extremists, eager to capitalize on the shift from extractive to service industries, include gays in a herd of scapegoats (environmentalists, the United Nations, tourists) collectively blamed for taking away their God-given right to the land.

Discovering Fire

Last February, Carla Grayson, a University of Montana psychology professor, and her partner, Adrienne Neff, sued the university system for benefits equity. The partners of gay and lesbian university employees are denied the opportunity to access coverage under the system's health insur-

ance plan. Two days after filing the suit, Carla and Adrienne began to receive death threats by mail. Four days later, an arsonist attempted to murder the couple and their son, Noah. The family escaped the fire but lost their Missoula home.

The LGBT and progressive communities were stunned. Supporters quickly rallied around the women, and called attention to the systemic influence of hate and bias. The symbol of fire was reclaimed. Lesbian Avengers ate fire. Placards of a rainbow flame went up in windows around town. A day after the arson Missoula human rights advocate Karen Loos told a crowd of 900: "Fire has long been used as a weapon...but in the West we know something about fighting fire with fire." And we do. Fire destroys. Fire promotes growth.

Mixing Metaphors

In the wake of the arson, grassroots organizing flourished. But as time stretches on, the adrenaline falls and passion subsides. Another group or two performs miracles for a couple of months. A few more people stand up and speak out for equality. The lawsuit continues its crawl through the court system. We are back to waiting for the next snow fall—for the first crevice to form on the surface of our glacier.

"Maybe it's part of the glacier's process to lose some of your fire," Bass reflects. "Fire is what we notice, but glaciers are what change the world."

He may be right. We are taught not to mix our metaphors. But somehow I think we need both fire and ice. Altering the political landscape requires the steady grind of truth and freedom against injustice and oppression. But without some volatility and passion, we may never catch the flickering vision of the new world we are working for.

Karl Olson is the director of PRIDE, Montana's statewide LGBT advocacy organization. He lives in Missoula and Helena. To learn more about PRIDE's work, visit www.gaymontana.com/pride.

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Reminder:

The July/August Newsletter is scheduled to be published in August. Happy Summer!