

port in the community, I noticed a sizeable gay community for a city the size of Lewiston. I wondered.. "Are these people only able to leave their homes at night? I don't see them volunteering." I discovered the answer to my own question a few days later on November 2nd, election day in Lewiston, Maine.

As election day neared and I began to really get to know my gay and straight brothers and sisters in the volunteer effort, I felt that even though I was a complete stranger to them a few days ago, an outsider from inside the beltway, that I belonged. Denis Gilbert let us have complete run of his home for ten days and volunteered daily. Roland Blais, local gay bar owner expended a tremendous effort in organizing and canvassing. Lewiston Mayor James Howaniec canvassed and helped us put up signs. Janet Welch the spearhead of EPL, a Franco-American Lesbian and native of Lewiston, inspired us all.

The polls opened on November 2nd at 7:30 A.M. and I arrived at my designated polling place to monitor the activity to make sure no underhanded deeds took place by the forces of the extremist right. Two women from the "Vote Yes to Repeal Special Rights" camp were there with clipboards ready to challenge Bates College students as to their legal residency. After she voted, one young student told me that she "sensed a lot of hate" from the two clipboard ladies. I simply agreed and said "That's why we're here." "Thanks," she said. We connected.

Later in the day I observed a young college student with a March on Washington for Lesbian & Gay Liberation T-shirt approach the ballot table. The two elderly women poll workers upon seeing the pretty design in the shape of a triangle on the shirt wanted to read it. Tracing the text on the shirt with her finger, one of the women was speechless, unsure of what to say, the other said, "Oh ... My son went to that." The elderly ladies eyes met. A connection was made.

Minutes later I noticed a young man whom I had made conversation with at the local gay bar two nights earlier. Although I didn't recall his name, I reached out to shake his hand and said a friendly hello. My gesture was ignored. I said hello again, and he recoiled and pointed to the woman in front of him at the polling-table, mouthing the words "that's my mother". Now I was the one who was speechless. I realized that he was not out to his mother, and simply because I had on a campaign button I was a threat. I was slapped back into the reality of Lewiston. There was no connection here.

Although it took only a moment, that incident told me a lot about why we lost in Lewiston. Our biggest enemy in this battle was not the extreme right and the hate-mongers. It was the closet. The fear tactics and stereotypes that our opponents use time and time again stuck like glue in Lewiston. Sure, there were some high profile lesbians and gays and gay friendly people there. But something was missing - the personal connection.

Lewiston is a small place, and it is reasonable to assume that every voter knew someone who is lesbian or gay. Every voter has a link to a friend, a family member or a co-worker who happens to be lesbian or gay. Unfortunately, they didn't know it. All over the country, too few of us have come out, even when our civil rights are on the line. In 1994, anti-gay initiatives may be on the ballots of as many as twelve states. If we are ever to win these battles against bigotry and discrimination, we all need to make more connections.

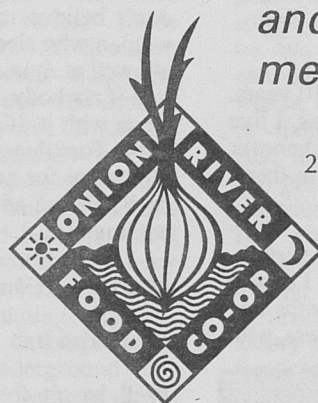
*Bill Darker, works in the Political Department of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, and spent the two weeks before election day campaigning against an anti-gay initiative in Lewiston, Maine ▼*

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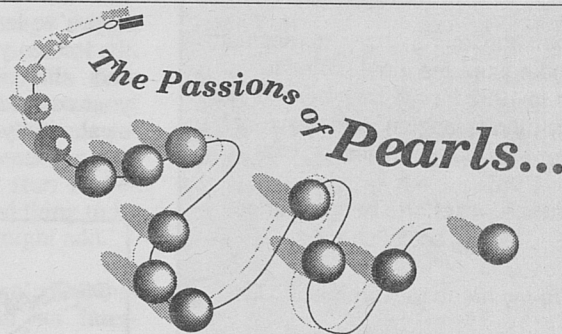
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