

Opening the door



to acceptance



Photos by JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

Ted Broussard, right, and John Wiesman enjoy strolls through the Vancouver Farmers Market each summer. Broussard and Wiesman celebrated their 20th anniversary as a couple in July. Top: James Phelps, left, and Tim Baldwin have lived as a gay couple for 18 years, 10 in Vancouver. They have different views on how public they wish to be about their sexual orientation.

Same-sex couples finding opinions have evolved along with the law

By MIKE BAILEY
Columbian staff writer

James Phelps and his partner of 18 years, Tim Baldwin, were among the first from Clark County to register with the state for a domestic partnership. But making the relationship official didn't change Baldwin's inclination to keep his sexual orientation relatively private or Phelps' devotion to advocating for gay rights.

"Sometimes opposites attract and we balance each other," Phelps said. "Tim's not as in-your-face as I am and by being quieter he pulls me more toward the middle. It's just our personalities ... who we are as people. I can be loud and Tim prefers to be less vocal."

Did you know?

■ In the 2000 U.S. Census, 697 couples identified themselves as same-sex couples in Clark County. Through Dec. 31, 2007, 112 of those couples had signed up for domestic partnership benefits. Statewide, 3,597 had signed up as of March 13.

Washington state's domestic partnership law, which went into effect in July, granted gay couples an opportunity to publicly affirm their commitment. By signing up with the registry, which is compiled by the Washing-

ton Secretary of State's office, these couples gain rights previously reserved for married heterosexuals including the ability to visit a partner in the hospital without seeking consent, the right to inherit property when there is no will and the ability to make funeral arrangements for a partner.

Gov. Chris Gregoire last week signed a measure with an additional 170 rights that include, among other things, guardianship and powers of attorney.

But as laws evolve for same-sex relationships in Washington, gay couples in Clark County say there's been little change in their

Right:
Vancouver's
Daris Freimuth
dresses in
drag as Rhea
Range and
performs at
the Northbank
Tavern in
Vancouver and
gay bars in
Portland.



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian



JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

Vancouver's Gary Sawyer holds a photograph of himself and his partner of 27 years, Daryl Lindley, who died in 2005. The two were married on March 9, 2004, when Multnomah County in Oregon offered gay and lesbian marriages.



JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

Kris Sharp, left, and Charlene Montierth celebrate the anniversary of their commitment ceremony each Dec. 21. They were married in Canada in 2003 and registered as domestic partners in Washington last year.

Gay:

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everyday reality. Some say they've discovered Clark County's attitudes toward same-sex couples were more accepting than they had guessed years ago.

In fact, a national study found that a region's political bent has little to do with whether the gay population in that area is rising or falling.

Migration to conservative areas

Gay populations are rising in some politically conservative suburban areas, which are near major urban cities, said Gary J. Gates, a senior researcher at the UCLA School of Law's Williams Institute and co-author of "The Gay and Lesbian Atlas."

Gates' report indicates that areas of the country traditionally considered socially conservative — such as Utah and Midwest states — have seen the highest increase of gays and lesbians.

Many gay couples interviewed for this story were attracted to Clark County's quality of life, relatively affordable housing market and proximity to Portland's cultural riches and the region's recreational opportunities.

How comfortable they've felt being open about their lifestyle had more to do with internal decisions than public policy.

Charlene Montierth and Kris

Did you know?

■ Among major metropolitan areas, Seattle ranks second and the Portland-Vancouver area fourth in the nation for estimated percentage of adult gays, lesbians and bisexuals, according a 2006 report issued by The Williams Institute.

■ A Gallup poll in 2007 showed a change in how Americans view gay and lesbian

relationships. Thirty-four percent of those surveyed thought being gay or lesbian was an acceptable alternative lifestyle in 1982. That number rose to 57 percent last year. Objections to homosexuality as a lifestyle have also shifted. For the first time since the survey has asked the question, a majority of respondents said they didn't believe homosexuality was morally wrong.

Sharp — who, like Phelps and Baldwin, were among the first to sign up as domestic partners — say registering had nothing to do with going public. They've always lived openly as a lesbian couple.

Years before the state's recognition of their relationship and not long after moving to Clark County, they held a commitment service in a Vancouver church.

Montierth and Sharp hold hands while walking their dogs through their upscale Brush Prairie neighborhood and Montierth, a professor at Clark County, is open with co-workers and students.

She also is the adviser for Queer Penguins, a gay-straight support group at the college.

"For the most part, students at school have no problems with me or the group," she said. "I never change a pronoun when I talk about my partner."

Montierth and Sharp say they've seen a growing acceptance over the years, something that is happening nationwide.

Unexpected acceptance

Politics also had nothing to do with a decision by Gary Sawyer and his former partner, Daryl Lindley, to live a more closeted life.

Their concern was Lindley's job.

Sawyer and Lindley lived together for 27 years until Lindley's death in 2005.

Lindley taught for Vancouver Public Schools for 30 years and they felt it was important to maintain a low profile about being gay. Their biggest concern was how parents would react should they discover Lindley was gay.

As it turned out, Sawyer said, they probably didn't have to be as secretive. "When Daryl died, we had students and people come from the

school to pay their condolences," he said. "They had known all along Daryl was gay, but it didn't matter."

Vancouver's Ted Broussard and John Wiesman have always been open with friends, neighbors and co-workers about their sexual orientation. But they too say change likely occurred in Clark County earlier than they had calculated.

Broussard said soon after moving to Clark County almost four years ago, he was concerned about the reaction from some residents if he and Wiesman were seen walking hand in hand through Esther Short Park.

"I don't think Clark County is ready for that," he said last year.

They feel differently today. They both feel more comfortable with public shows of affection and don't hesitate to exchange a kiss on the cheek or a hug when they meet for dinner at a restaurant.

"We love living here. We couldn't be happier with our choice," Broussard said.

But for some, living in Clark County still means facing resistance.

Daris Freimuth, a 45-year-old single gay man who has lived in Clark County all his life, has long relished making his sexual orientation public, especially when he's dressed in his drag queen persona, Rhea Range.

As Rhea Range, he's an imposing 7 feet tall when measured from the top of his massive wigs to the tips of his spiked heels.

Talking publicly still shunned by many gay couples

A majority of the gay and lesbian residents contacted for this story, including 17 of 26 couples, feared reprisal at work or from neighbors if they talked openly and publicly about their sexual orientation.

One lesbian in a 20-year relationship made a statement that represented the concerns of many who didn't want to talk publicly about their lifestyle.

"Our neighbors know we are gay," she said. "But what happens to that relationship with the neighbors when they read it in the paper? What happens to us when thousands of people read about us in the paper? How will our lives change? What happens to this comfortable life we have then?"

—Mike Bailey

"I think people in Vancouver aren't used to seeing someone who is obviously gay," he said. "Sure, we're out there ... but no one wants to talk about it. It's like it's OK with them as long as we don't talk about it."

Businesses catering to gay community see signs of change in attitudes

By MIKE BAILEY
Columbian staff writer

Clark County's only gay bar, Northbank Tavern, still blacks out its windows to protect its patrons' identities.

And, the Portland-Vancouver area's most prominent gay newspaper has faced repeated attacks by vandals and has had difficulties maintaining its downtown Vancouver newsstand.

But there are signs of change for institutions that represent the gay community in Clark County.

For more than two decades, Northbank Tavern was identified only by the rainbow colors at its front entrance on West Sixth Street in Vancouver.

Recently, the owners posted the bar's name above the front door. Hanging the sign was a milestone, because its owners had long considered keeping a low profile a matter of survival. Since it opened under a different owner in 1985, the bar and its patrons have been the target of hate crimes.

The most notable case was in 1999, when two gay men were attacked as they left the bar.

That incident happened before Brent Bartling and his partner, Darrell Spoon, bought the bar, but they too have experienced their share of trouble.

"We've had people drive by and stop their truck and run to the door and urinate on it," Bartling said. "People have walked by and thrown their Starbucks on the window where we have a sign explaining this is a gay bar. People still drive by and call our customers standing out front faggots."



Brent Bartling, left, and Darrell Spoon are co-owners of Vancouver's Northbank Tavern, the only gay bar in Clark County. The two share duties at home as well as at the bar.

But attitudes are changing in Clark County, Bartling said.

In six years as owners, Bartling and

Spooner said they have seen a steady decrease in the number of attacks. That gave them the confidence to hang the name of the bar on the front facade.

Washington State Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver, said he also has seen the sweeping change in acceptance since he was elected to the Vancouver City Council in the mid-1990s.

Moeller is the first openly gay man to serve on the council and represent the 49th District in the state Legislature.

During that first run for the council, Moeller said he was subjected to a barrage of verbal threats, most through phone calls to his home.

"But as soon as I was elected those threats stopped," he said.

He has not lost an election since being voted onto the city council and over time, he says, his sexual orientation has become less of an issue for voters.

Despite problems, the newspaper that caters to the gay community plans to expand here. Portland-based newspaper Just Out has replaced the newspaper stand on West Eighth Street, across from Esther Short Park. Vandals had repeatedly removed papers from the stand and tossed them in a trash can, and on one occasion the stand was moved and hidden behind shrubs.

Editor Marty Davis said she isn't convinced the vandalism is because it is a gay newspaper.

"All newspapers experience this," she said.

Davis said she plans to expand circulation in Clark County with a second newspaper stand later this month at the corner of West Eighth and C streets in downtown Vancouver.

The paper is still available at several locations in the county, including the Northbank.

KRISTINA WRIGHT for The Columbian