

A Brief History of PFLAG-Olympia

Condensed and edited from an article by by Evonne Hedgepeth, Ph.D., evonne@lifespandeducation.com in the summer 2014 "Heartbeat" with additional comments from Alec and Gabi Clayton

PFLAG of Thurston County (now known as PFLAG-Olympia) was started by a small group of citizens in 1993. The idea for creating some kind of advocacy organization in our community for gay/lesbian/bisexual people originated with a conversation between Evonne and her husband, Andy McMillan, about concerns that anti-gay activities in Oregon (specifically Ballot Measure 9 and Lon Mabon's group, Oregon Citizens Alliance) were probably headed to Washington state next. As a part-time Evergreen professor and independent trainer/consultant on gender and sexuality issues, Evonne had many contacts in the local gay community. So she and Andy had a meeting with leaders of gay-related organizations in Olympia (Curt Pavola, who later became Olympia's first openly gay city councilmember; David Kindle, Kathryn Ford and others) and asked them what could be done to help our community to prepare for this eventuality, especially since we were in the state's capital. This was at the time of the Hands Off Washington campaign, one of the first-ever and most successful campaigns to stop an anti-gay movement. Mabon's attempts to bring anti-gay legislation into Washington was soundly defeated.

One attendee said, "We already have 20 gay rights organizations in this town. What we really need is a PFLAG." Shortly after that, Andy and Evonne attended a GLBT rights rally at Sylvester Park where a young college student, Bryan Kirkpatrick, had a sign-up list for anyone interested in creating a PFLAG chapter. Andy and Evonne were the only signers. They later met with Bryan at a downtown restaurant and planned a PFLAG organizing meeting at a local church.

At that meeting, they met Paul and Betty Beeman, who had a lesbian daughter and were recent members of the PFLAG chapter in Bellingham (they had just moved to Olympia). Paul was a retired Methodist minister. Betty had worked earlier as a secretary for Dan Evans, the former governor of Washington, while he was president of The Evergreen State College. Evonne says, "We were thrilled they had come to join our efforts, and we left the meeting thinking, 'Who better to be the face of this organization than the Beemans?!' "

Paul and Betty served as co-presidents for many years. Andy and Evonne were active board members for its first three years, Andy as treasurer and political advocacy chair; Evonne as education chair and lead on many fund-raising activities. Other original board members included Kathryn Ford, Ron Hertel, and Stella Warner. Paul Beeman later was elected President of National PFLAG and served for several years.

Virgil Clarkson, longtime Lacey City Council member and Mayor, was another early member of PFLAG-Olympia. Virgil had a son who was gay. He was a member of First United Methodist Church and was instrumental in getting the church to provide PFLAG with a meeting place. There was dissension among the church's board, but Virgil insisted that welcoming all was a prime tenet of the church, and FUMC eventually welcomed us. For close to two decades now we have met in the Gathering place Room at FUMC.

For many years PFLAG-Olympia under the Beemans' leadership tabled every year at Super Saturday, the annual graduation ceremony at The Evergreen State College, and at the Thurston

County Fair and at the annual Capital City Pride celebration. There was a regular PFLAG television show on TCTV hosted by Helen Sabia.

In the early years we had a tent used at Pride and other tabling events that was huge, heavy and unwieldy. It took a team to put it up and take it down. For many years Steve Thompson stored, delivered and managed the erection and disassembly of the tent, a huge job. When Steve and his wife, Nancy, moved away from Olympia Jeff Loyer took over responsibility for the tent and did it for many years. Finally, Catherine Dawdy took over and convinced the board it was time to get a smaller and more easily portable tent and tables, which we did. She volunteered to take charge of set-ups for Pride and other events, which she did for a couple of years until she turned it over to Larry Konquist. Coincidentally, three of the four people who have taken on this job also served as Treasurer.

In 1995 Bill Clayton, a 17-year-old student at Olympia High School was beaten along with his best friend, Sam Schaeffer, in a gay bashing on the high school grounds. After that LGBT activist Anna Schlecht, founder of Capital City Pride and a leader in Hands Off Washington, organized an anti-hate rally in Sylvester Park. Hundreds of community members along with political leaders and school officials attended. Bill and Sam — with their friend Jennie Greenlee, who had been with them when they were attacked — spoke at the rally, as did Bill's parents, Alec and Gabi Clayton. After the rally, Paul Beeman invited Alec to be a guest speaker at a Father's Day PFLAG meeting, along with John Thorne (now deceased), the father of a gay daughter. Between that day and the day of the Father's Day meeting, Bill committed suicide. The Claytons attended the meeting and Alec spoke about his son's suicide.

In (date?) Paul Beeman stepped down as president of the Olympia chapter and he and Betty moved to Des Moines. Mike Walsh took over as president with co-president Karen Goldsby. After a short time Karen dropped off the board and Mike continued on as president until January 2003 when he stepped down and asked Alec to take his place. Alec's wife, Gabi, was already serving on the board and editing the "Heartbeat" newsletter. Alec served as president from 2003 until 2013 with a short break when Jeff Loyer took over temporarily, and as of this writing (June 2014) the Claytons still edit the newsletter.

Major programs undertaken by PFLAG-Olympia included a safe schools project in conjunction with PFLAG National's "Our House to the School House" project in which we did presentations to administration and faculty of area schools and donated LGBT books to the schools. Another major project was diversity project for which we got a grant from PFLAG National to show the film *Brother Outsider*, a biography of Bayard Rustin, in area schools and colleges, and we donated copies of the film and related literature to schools and the local library.

The Claytons dropped off the board at the beginning of 2013 and Courtney Schrieve took over as president and Robert Kowalski, a high school student, as vice president.