



Michigan paper tries new ways to empower gays

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Deb Price

Despite plenty of experience with the thrill of being swept up by her partner's energy and latest gotta-do idea, Jan Stevenson was floored in 1995 by four words: "I bought the newspaper."

The paper was a gay monthly called "Between the Lines."

Its owner was ill and rightly sensed that Stevenson's partner, Susan Horowitz, could transform the small-scale but worthy publication into a mighty voice for gay folks in Michigan.

Horowitz and Stevenson didn't have traditional journalism experience. That didn't stop them. "Temporary insanity will get you into all kinds of trouble," deadpans Stevenson.

Horowitz had once run the print shop in New York that produced the first "Silence = Death" posters for ACT-UP, the AIDS activist group.

Stevenson had been an MBA-credentialed corporate banker before finding her calling as a full-time gay-rights activist in Detroit after volunteering for a gay hotline and hearing "this phenomenal vacuum of need."

After Stevenson and Horowitz turned their talents to their newly acquired newspaper, it gradually expanded to a weekly with a circulation of 20,000 and a web site, Pridesource.com, visited up to 10,000 times a day.

"The newspaper has been a gentle watchdog for the community," Horowitz says. "As an advocacy publication, you are sensitive to how fragile things are. You want to push the community to challenge itself, but not push it over the cliff."

The newspaper is celebrating its 15th year, beginning with an exhibit of its news coverage at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's "Creating Change" conference in Detroit from Thursday to Feb. 10.

There's plenty to cheer.

In addition to providing a voice for gay people, the couple publishes a voters' guide every two years that spells out candidates' stands on discrimination against gay workers, parents and couples -- issues rarely mentioned in nongay publications.

And by persuading mainstream businesses to begin advertising in their paper, the couple has demonstrated the value of reaching out to gay customers.

Along the way, the women, who married in Canada two years ago, have marveled as everyday gay folks have grown increasingly comfortable being out -- going from being too fearful to allow their names in *Between the Lines* to grouching when their photos don't accompany articles that quote them.

While much of the gay news in Michigan has been painful -- none more so than when the state Constitution was amended in 2004 to ban recognition of gay marriages or other unions -- the paper has never lost its sense of humor: Fun gets poked at the homophobe designated "Creep of the Week."

PageOneQ.com's Mike Rogers, an influential Web-based activist, attributes *Between the Lines*' staying power to its willingness to try new ways to empower gays: "Today is about harnessing the power of the Web to create spaces for people to build community."

Already, visitors to *Pridesource.com* can post announcements and cast votes on newsy gay topics. In the works is a "citizen journalism" section, where activists will help build a more vibrant gay community by posting video clips, photos and blog items.

Four surprising words launched one of Michigan's most remarkable couples on the ink-stained adventure of a lifetime. How wonderful for the community that they chronicle and nourish.