

# Times have changed for the city's gay and lesbian community

RACHAL: Coming out as an activist and marching in a parade like today's would have been unthinkable in the 1970s.

By George Bryson Anchorage Daily News

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When he came to Anchorage looking for work as an accountant some 32 years ago, Tom Rachal was in his late 20s and well aware that he was gay -- even if that term for a homosexual male was fairly new back then.

But Rachal didn't tell anyone.

Not in Anchorage.

Not in 1970.

"The people in Anchorage who were gay or lesbian were extremely closeted back then," he says. "There was no such thing as a gay-pride parade. There was no such thing as a festival at the Park Strip. It was far more repressive than it is today."

A few people had begun to speak out but not always in Rachal's favor.

In the mid-1970s, the Anchorage Assembly passed an ordinance that would have prohibited discrimination in the city based on sexual orientation. The vote was unanimous. But speaking from the pulpit later that same week, a minister condemned the measure as pro-homosexual -- and Anchorage Mayor George Sullivan responded to the complaints that followed by killing the measure with his veto.

Working for the municipality a few years later as an accountant, Rachal could tell which way the political wind was blowing. He kept quiet about his sexual identity, worrying about losing his job or health benefits or pension -- even while



"I'm tired of hiding," Tom Rachal says. "At 60 ... I can take a little bit of harassment." Photo by Bob Hallinen / Anchorage Daily News

being nominated in 1988 as a municipal employee of the year.

After his retirement in 1997, those fears went away. Both he and Al Kaneta, his partner for 20 years, grew less secretive about their relationship. When Kaneta died in February from lung cancer at 75, Rachal finally quit caring what other people think.

"I'm tired of hiding," he says. "At 60 years old, you know, I can take a little bit of harassment."

**Q. Is harassment of gays, lesbians or bisexuals a particular problem in Anchorage? Has the city grown more tolerant?**

A. I think we've made progress in the last 30 years.

But I also know that we have not made nearly as much progress as other cities our size -- cities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, for example. Cities there seem to have gone further (with laws to protect against discrimination due to sexual orientation). We have no legal protections in the state -- or in this city.

We only ask to be treated equally. We do not want special consideration. We never have. Yet that is their perception, that we are asking for something different than the rest of the community.

**Q. Some people argue, "Well, if you want to be treated equally, don't ask for a special anti-discrimination clause. You already have those protections."**

A. But that's not true. We don't.

I happen to own my condominium. But a renter -- if a gay or lesbian renter is found out by a landlord, do you know that they can be evicted for no other reason than the fact that they are gay or lesbian? They may pay their rent on time. They may take care of the apartment. They may not damage it. They may not party at night. But a landlord has the legal right to evict a tenant simply because of their sexual orientation. Now what is fair about that?

**Q. How often do you think something like that actually happens in Anchorage?**

A. I don't think any one of us know. Because there is no method of tracking it.

**Q. Are there cities you can point to that are a lot less tolerant than Anchorage?**

A. Well, sure. In my home state of Louisiana I can name quite a few of them. You are just not outwardly gay or lesbian in Shreveport, Louisiana.

**Q. Do you think that's characteristic of the South?**

A. Pretty much so. It's the Bible Belt. The southern tier of states are very restrictive. There are exceptions. New Orleans, for example, is an exception. Miami and Fort Lauderdale are exceptions. You go into any smaller communities in the South, and you find there aren't that many gay bars, for example. But you go into Utah and there are probably not that many either.

**Q. You've served as coordinator of the Gay & Lesbian HelpLine. What are the range of calls you get?**

A. Oh, some are very frivolous, prank or hateful phone calls. We do get a few of those. Not that many. And I just totally ignore those.

The most frequent phone call I think has to do with people who are just now realizing at whatever age they are that they might be other than heterosexual. And they have questions. They don't know where to turn. They're confused. They're told by their church they're going to be damned and go to hell in some cases. They're told by society that "these people are sick, and you don't want to be one of them." Yet they know that there is something different about themselves.

We do not have professional counselors. We are not a crisis line. We are not an intervention line. We simply give peer-to-peer counseling, in terms of discussing the issue. That's all we can do. We can refer them. We have a resource manual; we can refer them to professional people.

**Q. A few things have happened in the last year in Anchorage -- the gay and lesbian library display controversy, for instance. What do you think was the end result of that?**

A. I think it gave us a rallying point. And it did probably open the eyes and ears of some of the community at large that there is discrimination that still takes place in their own hometown when it comes to gay and lesbian people.

**Q. Also this year, the Anchorage School District passed a resolution to include sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination regulations. Was that a**

## **step forward?**

A. Absolutely. That's a change that's already occurred in the hallways of the schools (in terms of less harassment). You saw it in the last school year. It is nowhere near 100 percent. We're hearing it from the teenagers -- they still hear the word "queer" and "fag" and so forth, but it's gotten a lot better.

Superintendent Carol Comeau deserves a great deal of the credit. Once she realized that these things were happening in the school district then she became a very strong supporter of including sexual orientation in the (anti-discrimination clause). And it passed on a 7-0 vote.

## **Q. You wouldn't have expected a 7-0 vote back in the '70s?**

A. Oh, good Lord, no. Probably it would be more like 6-1 against.

## **Q. Having lived here for 30 years, do you have some sense of the gay and lesbian population in Anchorage?**

A. By numbers? No. None of us do. And I don't think any city in the country actually knows how many there are in their city. So we're no different than that. I do know that in 1970 no one that I know of was totally "out of the closet" because of the political and social climate in Anchorage. There was one bar.

The only statistic that is quoted nationally -- it goes way back to the 1950s -- is that one person in 10 in the American population has had a homosexual experience. That's been disputed along the way.

If you want to play the numbers, that means that with 260,000 people in Anchorage there are approximately 26,000 (gays and lesbians). Now even if you say, well, only half of those people really are -- well that's still 13,000. I don't have any way of knowing. I've never seen 13,000 gays and lesbians in Anchorage at any one time.

## **Q. Not even at the parade?**

A. (Laughing) Come to the parade and come to the festival at the Park Strip after that, and maybe there's a couple of thousand. Those are not all going to be gay and lesbian people. A lot of them we call allies -- you know, heterosexual people who support the gay and lesbian community. And don't forget about the bisexuals who are also in our community. And transsexuals.

## **Q. PrideFest -- what does it do?**

A. I think it brings two things to the community. It brings gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people together. And No. 2, it gives us the opportunity to show the community at large that we're here and we're not ashamed. We're not going away. We're not going to hide.

So please come and join us, and let's work together. So that all of us can be equal. Because if one of us is not equal, then none of us are equal."



## TOM RACHAL

Retired municipal accountant, member of Anchorage PrideFest steering committee

BORN: October 29, 1941, in Shreveport, LA

EDUCATION: bachelor's, master's in education

### CAREER:

Teaching in Louisiana in the 1960s

Accounting in Alaska, beginning in 1970

Employed with municipality of Anchorage, 1984-1997

### AWARDS:

Employee of the Year runner-up, municipality of Anchorage, 1988

### VOLUNTEER WORK:

Former board member, Identity Inc., assisting the Anchorage gay and lesbian community

Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, board of directors, Anchorage chapter

Anchorage Gay & Lesbian HelpLine coordinator

### FAVORITE PASTIMES:

Computers, travel, social work

### MOST ADMIRERED FIGURE:

Martin Luther King Jr.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY GAY PRIDE PARADE is at 11 a.m. today in downtown Anchorage along Sixth Avenue from C to K streets. This is the

second annual parade. The PrideFest festival follows on the Park Strip noon-5 p.m. near the flagpole. Includes more than 40 vendors and five hours of local entertainment, including Kim Acuna, Lisa Parker, the Bear Tones and legendary diva Kristara.