

Organizing in C

Dear Wolf Creek Neighbor,

Wolf Creek is a home for a lot of different kinds of people. It's a place where freedom still means something and we'd like to keep it that way. As you probably know, recently a house was firebombed and burned to the ground. The residents are gay, and have been harrassed for the past month: the mailbox was knocked over, their car was rammed, and they were threatened with a gun.

We feel arson and terror have no part in the life of our community.

The household is planning to rebuild, starting from scratch. We hope that everyone will make a contribution (money, tools, building supplies) to the rebuilding of their home. Send money to Wolf Creek Fire Relief Fund, P.O. Box 98, Wolf Creek; send a note to that Box if you want to make arrangements for getting tools or building supplies to them.

By Carl Wittman

Eleanor and Bob are first on my list. I walk a quarter-mile up from the driveway, to the house they built a few years ago. Eleanor delivers the mail in Wolf Creek, and runs a small cottage industry in an outbuilding, soldering cells for a California electronics firm. Bob used to work for the California State Parks, until they, with family and friends, moved here to start an "intentional community."

Bob meets me at the door and I'm glad to find them both home. They designed the house. It's busy, warm, functional, with generous respect for the natural materials and setting. Bob hustles some tea together while we chat about the latest in our efforts to establish some sanity in local logging practices. The conversation moves on to their son and his choices for college, but they see the folder in my hand, and we all know there is more to my visit than catching up on gossip.

"Well," I start, a bit tense, "you've of course heard about the fire-bombing down at Creekland. I have a letter written up which I'd like you to sign. Basically, it's a call to Wolf Creek residents to help us rebuild the house, but a lot of the letter's value is symbolic." While they read the two copies I hand them, I try to explain, "It's pretty clear that the place was attacked because the residents are gay. There are children there too, and one of the men is black. The gay community had a meeting on Saturday and decided this letter would be a good idea. It gives people an accurate idea of what happened, and offers them a way to help. We felt it was important to mention that the people in the house are gay, even though a lot of people might be uncomfortable with that. After all, terrorizing people by burning their house down at 2 a.m. is something nearly everyone would deplore. If we never mention why that happened, we'll never get to the center of the problem."

I chose to see Bob and Eleanor first because we've worked together as neighbors for years. They respect my dance teaching, which has been of particular importance to their son. While homosexuality isn't something we talk about much, I have no doubts about their integrity concerning basic rights for gay people.

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Maybe I've talked too much. Eleanor is worried, she says. She's also been collecting signatures, supporting the Trails Committee, which is proposing a shift from corporate-management logging economy to a locally based recreation economy. Bob reaches for his pen. For him it is an issue of morality and Eleanor's practical considerations are irrelevant. I am delighted with him. We chat a bit longer, and Eleanor picks up the pen mid-sentence, and signs, too.

I wander down the path, feeling good, not only because there are some names to start the petition with, but because of the support and clarity they've offered me. Even though most of the time since the fire-bombing I've felt calm and peaceful, I, like the other gay people here, have felt nervous at times. A dog barks in the night, and I have trouble falling asleep, wondering if a Molotov cocktail will smash through our window. But today, in the bright sunshine, and Eleanor and Bob having so gracefully helped launch this letter project, my fear seems distant.

"just." Land-use planning has been the big issue on the City Involvement Committee, which is the nearest thing we have to a body with an official status, and Julie has chaired it for years. She recently got a job 20 miles away in the county seat at an agency which helps old people get interest-free loans for home improvements. She's broadminded and thoughtful and eloquent as any of her generation, reflecting the Finnish social democratic tradition in which her father brought her up.

Larry works at the plywood mill nearby. I suspect he's a fish out of water there: he seems to like more stimulation. But jobs are hard to come by here, interesting jobs harder. He's having breakfast, Julie getting ready. They hear me out, vent some anger and frustration at the homicidal arson which could have killed people. Larry says "Sure, I'll sign it. We're busy to help, but we can contribute some money to rebuilding." Julie, like Eleanor, has to face the public more, and my guess is that she's quickly weighing what price she'll have to pay for sticking her neck out on this one. She signs, too. This is turning out a lot better than I feared.

I check in at the garage where Julie's brother Chuck both works and lives with his mother. The modest but large building is surrounded by a yard which more than adequately describes their lives. His end of the yard is filled with a dozen or more vehicles, in various states of repair. There's junk, tools, motors, grease. Hers is neatly manicured lawn, beds of dormant bulbs, bushes, perennials. When she's sick, his end becomes madder than ever, and imperils the flower beds, as more cars and more amateur mechanics appear. The tide turns when his energy is low and his is high: amidst the junked cars comes the sign of sweeping; the parts are sorted out and put in careful piles.

Chuck isn't there, but Mrs. Keto is. I tell her about the letter. She, too, is incensed about the arson, but wants to know why they did it. "Because they're homosexuals." She says, "Oh" in an accepting way. She only knows what her life, her upbringing, have given her to cope with this situation. I don't ask her point blank to sign it, and she says, "Well, I'll get Chuck to sign it."

Feeling courageous, I head off to the Lollars. They have lived in town forever. She's the standard bearer of the Republican Party, the head of the Ladies' Sewing Circle, the voting registrar, and key-holder of our community center building — as much of an unofficial mayor as our town's incorporated town possesses. My last contact with Ethel was a few years ago, when we were organizing a food-buying club. She wanted 10 pounds of rolled oats, non-organic. (When a 70-year-old tells you she's been eating non-organic food and it hasn't shortened her life, what can you say?) We spent an awkward but somehow poignant half-hour in her kitchen weighing out the oats, wanting to "feel community" without having trouble with the particulars.

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Passing through the intersection that people think of as town, where the Greyhound stops twice a day and the two stores operate, I see Jay New Yorker who settled here nearly as long as I. He's active with the Fire Department, and says, "Sure, I'll sign anything. I'd like to see them get out of town, people who are crazy enough to burn a house down."

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Next stop is the Colvins. I realize, driving up to their neat, suburban-looking house, that they are "different." They decry, as we all do, the materialism, the smog, the congestion of urban America; they decry, I am sure, the cultural poverty and narrowness of vision which characterizes

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Next on the list of people to see are Buster and Laurie. They moved to Wolf Creek about eight years ago, the same time I did — also hippies from California. A friend of theirs moved up here with them, and came out soon after. I've never felt uncomfortable about being openly gay with them. A few years ago the police and welfare took away the children at a lesbian commune up the road, and Buster and Laurie volunteered without hesitation to coordinate a phone-tree, in case things got worse.

It's early Saturday morning and both of them are still in bed. They both have colds, and Laurie is covered with bandages because of rampant poison oak. I get immediately to the point, filling them in on our speculations about who might have done "it," answering a few perfunctory questions. They sign right away and we spend a half-hour recalling some tense times seven or eight years ago when, as freaks, we were afraid, when there was a lot of resentment and hostility in the community about hippies moving in. Laurie remembers a movie series we held at the community center twice a month, and how they were afraid to leave their cabin unguarded. We chuckle about how little we had of value then, how relatively comfortable we've become since then. I'm glad that in the course of growing up, finding livelihoods — Buster supports them logging — and acquiring some comforts, we've not lost our sense of justice, our willingness to come together during a crisis.

My list of folks to ask doesn't include many "old-timers." The few I befriended years ago have died or moved away. In a decade, they've become a distinct minority here — withdrawn, isolated, poor, old, sick and outnumbered by the newcomers — first hippies, but, increasingly, an assortment of people, mostly looking for some escape from California.

Julie and Larry, however, are young (I guess in their late 20s) and born and bred in Wolf Creek. Julie's family moved here right after World War II from Minnesota. Her father set up a garage here and her older brother has continued it. He is the master mechanic and improviser in this rural freeway community, rich in old vehicles and poor in nearly everything else. Julie is a civic leader, outspoken on whatever she sees as

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Feeling courageous, I head off to the Lollars. They have lived in town forever. She's the standard bearer of the Republican Party, the head of the Ladies' Sewing Circle, the voting registrar, and key-holder of the community center building — as much of an unofficial mayor as our incorporated town possesses. My last contact with Ethel was a few weeks ago, when we were organizing a food-buying club. She wanted 10 pounds of rolled oats, non-organic. (When a 70-year-old tells you she's eating non-organic food and it hasn't shortened her life, what can I say?) We spent an awkward but somehow poignant half-hour in her tag kitchen weighing out the oats, wanting to "feel community" and having trouble with the particulars.

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Passing through the intersection that people think of as town, where the Greyhound stops twice a day and the two stores operate, I see Jim, the New Yorker who settled here nearly as long as I. He's active with the Planning Department, and says, "Sure, I'll sign anything. I'd like to see them get out of town, people who are crazy enough to burn a house down."

Back to Chuck's. He grabs the paper and says, "Listen, before I get any more signatures, lemme talk with the fire marshal and make some changes." I press him on it, and it appears he wants to expand the sentence about arson. I agree to check back later in the afternoon. So much the better if he's part of making up the letter, as long as he doesn't delete anything important. I decide to leave him the unsigned copy and proceed on.

Next stop is the Colvins. I realize, driving up to their neat, suburban-looking house, that they are "different." They decry, as we all do, the materialism, the smog, the congestion of urban America; they decry, surely do, the cultural poverty and narrowness of vision which characterizes this part of Oregon, which has supported George Wallace in the two Presidential primaries. But they are not funky, like those of us who used to be hippies, or like the Oakies who moved here in the '30s and '40s. It's not money so much as aspirations, image. Jim is active in the Democratic Party, but didn't do well last year in his first attempt at political office. They tried to set up a gourmet restaurant at the country club in the county seat, but there isn't a base for that kind of establishment.

Marie teaches French at the junior high school, and is seen as an extremist environmentalist there. She regales me with a tale about winning her enthusiastic charges surround a defenseless co-student on the playground and stiff-arm him into signing a "Save the Seals" petition. Marie has spunk.

They sign my letter without hesitation, and postpone their Saturday tennis game for an hour while we exchange ideas, catch up on news. I see me to the door, telling me to be sure to stop at Ed Lake's, a neighbor who is a heavy equipment operator. Marie's cookies and tea remind me I've had practically nothing to eat all day. Unselfconsciously, I must have downed seven or eight big cookies while they each had one.

The list of names on the petition has grown now. There are enough already to send out, even if I stopped now. A good morning's work.

Rumor has it that the arsonists hang out at a dirt bike race track a few miles south on the freeway. It turns out that the people at a commune called "The Trestle" rent a building from the race track owner where they run a welding shop. So I go off to the Trestle, which is so-named because in winter you can't ford the creek, and have to walk in about a mile, the path goes along a railroad trestle over the creekbed. The Trestle is one of about six big communes started in the early seventies. Like the others, it is now populated by a fraction of the numbers it once had. Fred is unloading firewood next to the dome where he lives. I'm wearing dark string corduroys and a new work shirt, informal but not hippy. At first he's not sure he recognizes me. I ask for Bob, whom I know much better than Fred, but apparently he's not often here. Fred hasn't heard a

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the fire, but he recalls when rednecks came in to shoot up their commune, years ago, and they ran them off with guns of their own.

He signs the letter and invites me in to smoke a joint. "Those guys should get themselves guns," he says. I talk about my fear of guns: "I'd probably shoot my own foot off before I'd do anything else with a gun." "That's because you're afraid of it." "Yup." He sees my fear as something to overcome, but I think of it as congenital. I think about the meeting last week, a circle where 30 faggots and dykes talked about their feelings and ideas. Whether or not to have guns was a major topic, and I'm at one end of the spectrum on that issue. I try not to speak for gay people to Fred. Fred is most concerned about catching and jailing the arsonists, but I'm more concerned about getting community support in defense of our rights to live here without harassment. I leave feeling good about Fred, glad he's on our side, and glad that I've been around this town for eight years. Fred remembers the first winter they were there and were frozen out. They all stayed at my place, taking baths and warming up. I hope it isn't just little things like that which make people open to us queers, but it sure helps when you're asking for support.

Tired but pleased, I head to Creekland, where a good 20 people are having a "work day," cleaning up the burnt rubble and beginning to rebuild. The picture of all these people, faggots and dykes mostly, a few other friends, kids here and there, working together, a new building going up, the ashes cleared away, is very moving. There's been a great deal of conflict over the last five years among these people about men and women, separatism, race, class, sissiness, you name it. More than once I've chosen to direct my energy elsewhere than the "gay community." But, as I crossed the footbridge and saw everyone, I found myself saying "Almost looks like a community." A dyke friend chides me on my cynicism, and we laugh.

My speculations about the nature of community get lost in the immediacy of the situation. People gather around to see who signed, who said what. Kaicha is high up on a flatbed cart, guiding two enormous workhorses to haul off the rubbish. She was supposed to go out with me today to get signatures, but fell behind in schedule. She, of course, is glad things went well. Seeing her with the horses, doing something I could never do, I'm glad we are all so different. I feel a bit awkward with my nice clothes and clipboard amidst this. I chat with Kaicha and a few others who want to help get signatures later, and then push on. I stop to see Chuck and then go home to nurse my cold.

I finally track Chuck down at the cafe, having coffee with John the Fire Marshal, Coleen, and someone I don't know. Chuck has forgotten his copy of the letter, and quickly takes mine and hands it to John to read. John looks it over and hears me out. He thinks that arson and gayness are two separate issues, and wants me to remove that reference. He thinks it will offend people and if we take it out we will get broader support. He isn't sure if there is a connection between the firebombing and the residents' gayness. I tell him that we talked about that, and many folks, at first, wanted to put in a lot more about the harassment of gay people. This reference was not negotiable. He continued to argue, but signed the letter.

Chuck signs it. Coleen, who moved here recently and is somewhat naively excited about expanding the Fire Department newsletter to include "community" news, asks if she can sign, too. Of course, although we'd been seeking out mostly names that people would recognize when they received it in the mail.

I turn to the stranger, a 40-ish man with greyish scraggly hair and a short beard. "I'm Wilbur Wilson," he says. "Oh, great! Deborah told me to ask you to sign the petition." We play duets together, and she works with Wilbur at City Hall at the county seat. He signs, and mentions that occasionally he has access to old buildings which need to be torn down. I have visions of good structural wood, nice old windows and doors, and leap to accept his offer. It is a gift of the nicest kind towards rebuilding a main house at Creekland.

Well, four birds with one stone, an unfortunate metaphor. I am immensely pleased.

At supper there's a message from Marie Colvin: Jim wants to have his name taken off the letter. Apparently he has talked to some of his political cronies around the county that afternoon, and they feel it would be a bad move for him to connect himself with it. Talking with him later, he discards any personal fear or self-interest, but argues vociferously

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The list of names on the petition has grown now. There are enough already to send out, even if I stopped now. A good morning's work.

Rumor has it that the arsonists hang out at a dirt bike race track a few miles south on the freeway. It turns out that the people at a commune called "The Trestle" rent a building from the race track owner where they run a welding shop. So I go off to the Trestle, which is so-named because in winter you can't ford the creek, and have to walk in about a mile, and the path goes along a railroad trestle over the creekbed. The Trestle is one of about six big communes started in the early seventies. Like the others, it is now populated by a fraction of the numbers it once had. Fred is unloading firewood next to the work where he lives. I'm wearing drawstring corduroys and a new work shirt, informal but not hippy. At first he's not sure he recognizes me. I ask for Bob, whom I know much better than Fred, but apparently he's not often here. Fred hasn't heard about

commit over the last five years among these people about men and women, separatism, race, class, sissihood, you name it. More than once I've chosen to direct my energy elsewhere than the "gay community." But, as I crossed the footbridge and saw everyone, I found myself saying "Almost looks like a community." A dyke friend chides me on my cynicism, and we laugh.

My speculations about the nature of community get lost in the immediacy of the situation. People gather around to see who signed, who said what. Kaicha is high up on a flatbed cart, guiding two enormous workhorses to haul off the rubbish. She was supposed to go out with me today to get signatures, but fell behind in schedule. She, of course, is glad things went well. Seeing her with the horses, doing something I could never do, I'm glad we are all so different. I feel a bit awkward with my nice clothes and clipboard amidst this. I chat with Kaicha and a few others who want to help get signatures later, and then push on. I stop to see Chuck and then go home to nurse my cold.

I finally track Chuck down at the cafe, having coffee with John the Fire Marshal, Coleen, and someone I don't know. Chuck has forgotten his copy of the letter, and quickly takes mine and hands it to John to read. John looks it over and hears me out. He thinks that arson and gayness are two separate issues, and wants me to remove that reference. He thinks it will offend people and if we take it out we will get broader support. He isn't sure if there is a connection between the firebombing and the residents' gayness. I tell him that we talked about that, and many folks, at first, wanted to put in a lot more about the harassment of gay people. This reference was not negotiable. He continued to argue, but signed the letter.

Chuck signs it. Coleen, who moved here recently and is somewhat naively excited about expanding the Fire Department newsletter to include "community" news, asks if she can sign, too. Of course, although we'd been seeking out mostly names that people would recognize when they received it in the mail.

I turn to the stranger, a 40-ish man with greyish scraggly hair and a short beard. "I'm Wilbur Wilson," he says. "Oh, great! Deborah told me to ask you to sign the petition." We play duets together, and she works with Wilbur at City Hall at the county seat. He signs, and mentions that occasionally he has access to old buildings which need to be torn down. I have visions of good structural wood, nice old windows and doors, and leap to accept his offer. It is a gift of the nicest kind towards rebuilding a main house at Creekland.

Well, four birds with one stone, an unfortunate metaphor. I am immensely pleased.

At supper there's a message from Marie Colvin: Jim wants to have his name taken off the letter. Apparently he has talked to some of his political cronies around the county that afternoon, and they feel it would be a bad move for him to connect himself with it. Talking with him later, he disavows any personal fear or self-interest, but argues vociferously that this letter, with its mention of "gay," might bring down even more violence.

We decide to speed up the process of getting further signatures, printing it and mailing it out. Perhaps more people will want to back out (shades of ERA!).

Later that night, five of us are sitting around the fire after dinner. Kaicha leaves to go home, and is back in minutes, in tears. A pickup truck was blocking her exit from the driveway when she went out, and its four occupants had jumped out and approached her, shouting "Queer, faggot!" She raced back up the driveway to safety. We all felt shaken. We go down to the road, but they've left. One of us sees her home and later Allan and I talk about how vulnerable we are. We think of repairing the front gate and locking it at night, getting a telephone, having fire drills occasionally, and putting another fire extinguisher and some barrels of water here and there.

This is the closest I've come to that kind of fear in a long time. I sleep restlessly, wake up from a nightmare in which I need to scream for help but no noise comes out. It is immensely reassuring to reach out to Allan and be held, I wonder how much scarier it is for whoever among us who was sleeping alone tonight. The day and the night are so different.

A Postscript

Next day we get a dozen more signatures, including the minister, the owner of one of the stores and the woman who manages. Another signer was the manager of the Wolf Creek Inn, which is being reopened this month by the state as an historic site and restaurant/hotel. We hustled it off to the printer, and sent it out to the 150 rural mailboxes and 200 post office boxes in town. So far, some money has come in, and the minister and the storekeeper have stood firm in the face of criticism for having signed it. No more incidents have occurred, and rebuilding is going apace. Contributions are welcome from afar as well as locally. Please send them to P.O. Box 98, Wolf Creek, OR 97497.