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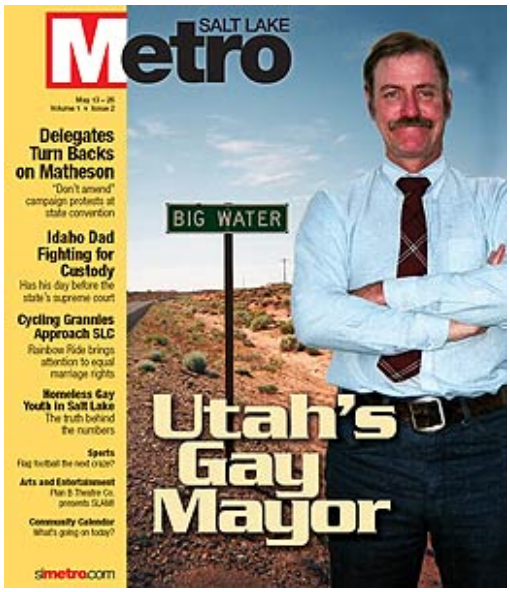

Utah's Gay Mayor

Even Utah's largest and most progressive metropolis would be hard-pressed to elect an openly gay mayor. Why is it, then, that a small town of 400 could do it?

By Brandon Burt

Marty Harrington is an affable and quick-witted woman. She runs the Escalante Corner Mart and is eager to show off her artwork for newcomers to her town. A striking mural in blues and whites covers an unused rear entrance to the convenience store, in cool contrast to the store's arid desert surroundings: "It only took me two hours to paint it," she proudly declares.

The town is Big Water, eight miles north of the Arizona border. It's one of those blink-and-you-miss-it, speed-trap municipalities in southern Utah. Most Highway 89 travelers drive right past it on road trips to destinations such as Lake Powell, the Grand Canyon and Phoenix.

Yet Big Water is home to some 400 people who, for one reason or another, would find life in the region's larger towns — Kanab, Utah and Page, Ariz. — to be intolerable.

Q: How do you like living in Big Water?
Harrington: I love it.
Q: How long have you lived here?
Harrington: About 12 years.
Q: What's the best thing about living out here?
Harrington: Low crime. It's small — everybody knows everybody. We have a community dinner once a week. But less crime, I think, is the best thing.

Unlike the denizens of Big Water, gay people born into small towns tend to flock to larger cities — so-called "magnet communities" — with populations large enough to support viable dating and cultural scenes. Rural areas have a reputation for harboring homophobes and busybodies — in order for a gay man to survive in Big Water, surely he must lead a closeted existence, keeping a low profile lest ostracism or worse befall him.

Meet Willy Marshall, the openly gay mayor of Big Water.

In 2001, in a state where the term "openly gay elected official" is (almost) an oxymoron, Marshall came out to voters during his Libertarian campaign for Big Water's highest office — and handily won the election.

"When I campaigned, I went to every single door in town," said Marshall. "I spent $15 on my campaign for flyers."

Marshall believes that coming out during the campaign may have contributed to his election.

“One of my supporters was the former town marshal. He went around to peoples’ houses, and during his conversation with them, he’d say, ‘Now, you know he’s gay, right?’ They all said, ‘Well, yeah — what’s that got to do with it?’”

It was this inoculation strategy that prevented Marshall’s opponents from capitalizing on the gay issue, he says. “If he hadn’t brought it up, the people running against me could have said, ‘You don’t want a faggot for a mayor.’ It would have planted the seeds of doubt,” Marshall said.

Confronting voters directly with the issue gave them a chance to deal with it before the election, says Marshall. “It got it [the gay issue] out in the open. When you get them to take a stand like that, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Since his election, Marshall has grabbed his share of headlines. One of his first actions as town mayor was repealing his own salary. “The mayor was getting $13,000 a year, which is more than most people in Big Water even make,” Marshall said. “It’s a very small town and I didn’t think that was right.”

Allowing the mayor’s office to collect tax dollars for its services was not the only city ordinance that raised Marshall’s Libertarian hackles. “After we cut municipal taxes by 50 percent, we decriminalized marijuana,” remembers Marshall.

It was this issue – marijuana decriminalization – that garnered the town national attention. Still, the reaction by Kane County officials was quick and harsh, and in the end the weed remained illegal, even within the town’s limits.

From the time Big Water incorporated as a municipality in 1983, it has had a way of generating media attention. The town’s first mayor was the outspoken polygamist Alex Joseph.

Joseph and his wives differentiated themselves from other Utah/Arizona border-town polygamists, most of whom shun outsiders. Joseph’s family actually seemed to thrive on media attention, willing as they were to present a different face of polygamy: one based more upon personal autonomy for the wives as well as the husband than upon the absolute (and often abusive) authority husbands wield over wives in fundamentalist communities like Colorado City.

Joseph died in 1998 at the age of 62 after a long battle against liver cancer. Perhaps because of his own deep belief in personal freedom, during Joseph’s life he encouraged his wives — who, at the time of his death, numbered seven — to be as independent as possible and to pursue their own careers. Many of them ended up as successful journalists, real estate agents, even lawyers.

Boudicca Joseph is one of Alex Joseph’s widows. Boudicca is not the kind of polygamist who refuses to be photographed – she’s the kind of polygamist who refuses to be photographed until she’s had a chance to wash her hair. Attractive and articulate, she still resides in Big Water and runs the town’s only real estate business.

“Big Water is about freedom,” Boudicca said. “Alex was always about freedom and choice. He moved out here in the desert to get away from people because he didn’t want to oppress his neighbors with his lifestyle.”

It is that freedom that seems to be Alex Joseph’s enduring legacy — everywhere you go in Big Water, people talk about freedom, whether it’s freedom from crime, from high taxes, or from excessive government regulation.

It was this emphasis on total freedom that first drew Marshall, a longtime Libertarian activist, to the town. “I came to Big Water in 1986 when I was out on a recruiting mission to find candidates for the Libertarian party,” said Marshall. “I had read about Alex Joseph in the paper, and I thought, ‘Wow — he should be a Libertarian!’”

On his first trip to the town, Marshall met with Joseph's wives, leaving with them a copy of Robert Ringer's Restoring the American Dream. "I said, 'Give him this book, and have him read it. If he likes it, we'd like him to join the Libertarian Party and run for office on our ticket.'"

Ringer's book apparently had the intended effect. Joseph changed his political affiliation from Republican to Libertarian, bringing with him all four members of the town council. According to the archives of the Libertarian Party News, that was the year Big Water became the nation's first "Libertarian Party town government."

After that, Marshall became well acquainted with the Joseph family. "After that, we became friends and they just started treating me like a member of the family," Marshall said. "I've been coming down here ever since on a pretty regular basis. I bought property here and I thought, 'Someday I'm going to move to Big Water.'"

"Being in political office has been a major life goal ever since I got off my [LDS] mission." After his mission, Marshall felt drawn to Libertarian politics. "Its basic principal is free agency," he explained.

Marshall made several bids for public office on the Libertarian ticket before his move to Big Water in 2000. "Within a couple of months of moving here I was appointed to the planning commission, and a couple months after that, I was appointed to be on town council."

It was during the midst of a town squabble over "disincorporation" – a proposal to revoke the town's charter – that Marshall was elected as mayor.

Perhaps it was Alex Joseph's legacy of constitutionalist freedom and personal autonomy which allowed an openly gay candidate to win public office in a town that is as rural as can be.

"This town has a few bigots, but not very many," said Boudicca. "Most people who live here have a live-and-let-live attitude. They mind their own business."

"Anytime you're living an alternative lifestyle, people may have a prejudice," Boudicca said. "Then they get to know you and generally it will fall away because they've realized you're just a real person."

In fact, it seems that residents who were able to tolerate having a polygamist mayor may be more likely to be tolerant of a gay mayor.

Still, Boudicca is wary of those who would find too many similarities between polygamy and homosexuality. "I don't like them being lumped together," she said.
Boudicca seems to have successfully embraced tolerance as a pure concept: Even though her religious beliefs place strong value on a procreative lifestyle – i.e., marriage as a "breeding contract" – she seems very reluctant to impose those beliefs on others.

"Quite frankly, I would be heartsick if [my son] David were gay," said Boudicca. However, the fact that Marshall is gay doesn't bother her. "It's not an issue for me. I'm not gay, so I don't have to make a choice about it. It has nothing to do with Willy's performance as mayor."

"What I believe in is choice and freedom. Nobody should have the right to tell somebody else who they should marry or who they should form contracts with," says Boudicca. "Everybody should have the same protections under the law."

The residents of Big Water seem to have figured one thing out: If you want freedom for yourself, you have to be willing to give others that same freedom.

Sure, some of them are probably homophobic – Marshall has been called a "faggot" by his political opponents – but the townspeople seem to value a "mind your own business" ethic more strongly than they dislike homosexuality.

Back in the Escalante Corner Mart, Marty Harrington sells bottled water for tourists and

a few grocery items for locals.

Q: What do you think of the mayor?
Harrington (after a long pause): He's okay. Yeah. I've heard bad things about him, but I've heard good things, too. He's never done nothing bad to me.