

Whosoever Believeth

Candace Chellew and her new magazine spread the gospel that 'gay' and 'Christian' aren't mutually exclusive terms.

by **Richard Shumate**
Special to Bay Windows

ATLANTA — Candace Chellew's epiphany began while, of all things, giving a radio traffic report.

Freelancing for an Atlanta traffic service earlier this year, one of Chellew's assigned tasks was to give rush-hour enlightenment to listeners of WNIV-AM, a right-wing Christian talk radio station. For two weeks, as she waited for her cues to go on the air with word of the latest jams, she simmered — albeit with a sense of humor.

"I would sit there and listen to them bash ... in almost every show. Then it would be like, 'Now, let's go to the lesbian at the traffic desk,'" she says. "I made a vow that on my last day, I would send all the fundamentalists right into the worst traffic I could find."

If she was challenged by that experience, she was spurred on even more by a verbal tete-a-tete she had with ex-gay minister Anthony Falzarano while she was a member

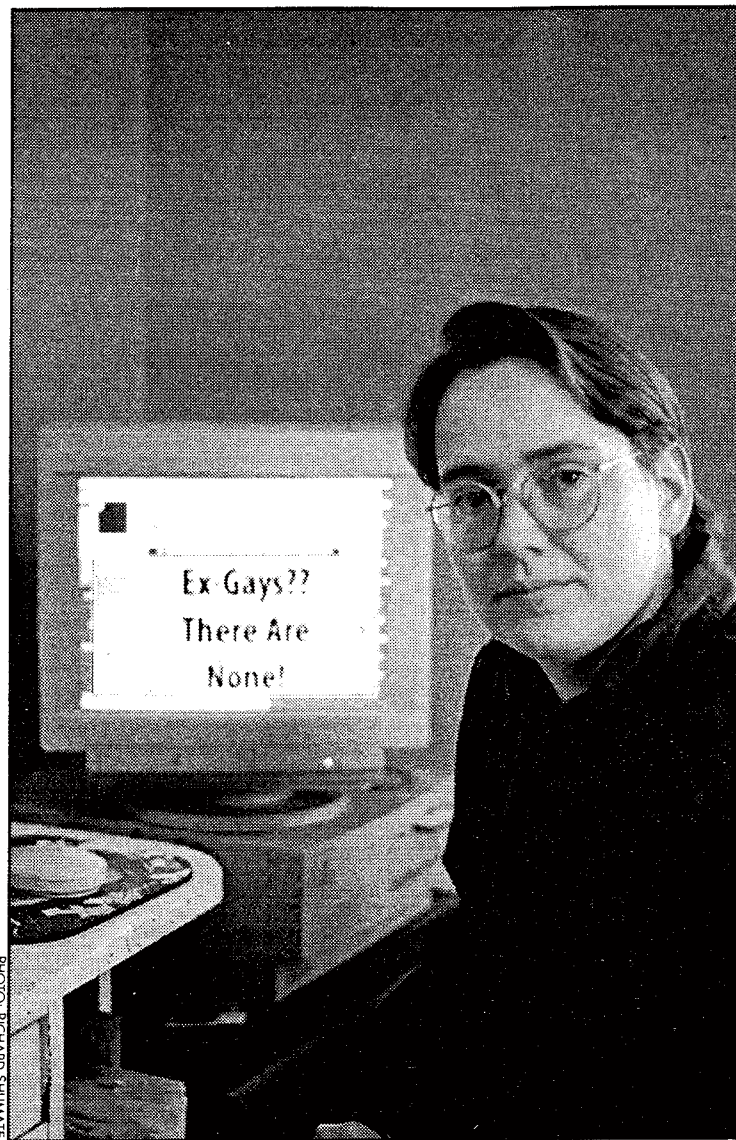
of the audience at a taping of CNN's Talk Back Live. Falzarano, who claims to have been cured of homosexuality in the name of Jesus, was taking questions. So Chellew stepped up asked him if he was still attracted to men.

"He said, 'No.' But they jerked the microphone away before I got a chance to say, 'Well, then, you probably weren't gay to begin with,'" she says.

Chellew's epiphany was that she needed to do something to counter the myth that one cannot both be gay or lesbian and serve and believe in God — to counter those people who are, in her view, misusing the Bible and Christian teachings to justify their own bigotry.

The result is Whosoever, her fledgling bimonthly news journal for lesbian and gay Christians that just recently published its third issue and has its own page on the World Wide Web. In each issue, Chellew takes a single topic — same-sex marriage, how gay and lesbians are being integrated into some main-

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Whosoever believes: gay Christians

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stream denominations — and expounds on that theme with essays from a variety of writers who work from a perspective that's Christian without being anti-gay.

"It's for those people who may be searching, who want to know that God still loves them even if they are gay," Chellew says. "If I had seen a magazine like this when I was struggling, I think it would have helped me."

Chellew is the daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher who grew up in a small town just outside of Atlanta. And while she doesn't remember her father ever specifically giving a gay-bashing sermon, what was enforced and reinforced during her childhood and adolescence was a stridently heterocentric model for what her life should be — a model that didn't match what she knew to be her own identity.

"You were supposed to grow up and marry a man and have children. That's normal," Chellew says. As she discovered that what she felt and what she wanted didn't fit this mold, "I thought I was going to have to make a choice."

And she did. She stopped talking to God, deciding that "if I'm going to go to Hell, I'm going to go to Hell happy." But three years later, her then-girlfriend convinced Chellew to attend a service at a gay-friendly Metropolitan Community Church, where she saw a preacher stand in a pulpit and tell her that God loved her.

"It had been a long time since I had heard that," Chellew says. "I know it sounds hokey, but it was one of those mountaintop experiences. I literally left in tears."

"What I finally realized is that I left God, but He never left me."

Like other lesbian and gay Christians, Chellew often encounters brothers and sisters in the gay community who have chosen, as she once did, to put Christianity aside — but

who, unlike her, have happily stuck with that decision. Like conservative Christians, they too, often see being gay and being Christian as incongruous.

"You're sort of like a gay Republican," Chellew jokes. As someone who once made that same choice, she says she respects the decisions of gays and lesbians who have left Christianity behind, and she doesn't see Whosoever as a tool for evangelizing them. But she does hope that "it might prompt some of them in some spiritual way."

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One who did was a man to whom Chellew posed a rhetorical question: "If you can't deal with me on Earth, how are you going to deal with me in Heaven?"

"He said, 'That's easy. You won't be there,'" says Chellew. "I thought it was interesting that he was questioning my salvation. I didn't question his. I just assumed he was going to Heaven, and he just assumed I wasn't. I guess we'll see who will be surprised."

Distributed in about 30 bookstores across the country, the circulation of Whosoever, with its niche audience of gay Christians, has remained small, and advertising has been scant. Chellew admits that she sometimes thinks about what else she could be doing with the money she is pouring into the publication.

"But then I get people who tell me how much the magazine means to them," she says. "And I just don't feel like I can kill it. It's something that is needed."

(The Web site for Whosoever is <http://www.mindspring.com/~sagecomm/whosoever>. The e-mail address is sagecomm@atl.mindspring.com and the mailing address is P.O. Box 133045, Atlanta GA 30333.) ▼