Smart and compatible:
Eric Allman (left) and
partner Kirk McKusick

# What a connection

One helped develop E-mail, and the other fine-tuned the PC.
Americans' lives are easier because these guys click

**SPECIAL CYBER REPORT**

## BY STEVE FRIESS

Judging from national opinion polls on same-sex marriage, many Americans seem intent on keeping gays apart. Yet it is a gay couple who can be credited for bringing the entire nation—indeed the world—closer together.

Without the technological contributions of Eric Allman and Kirk McKusick, a simple day of office work, such as sending E-mails and storing information on a personal computer, would be much more complicated. "There is some sort of perverse pleasure," Allman says, "in knowing that it's basi-

cally impossible to send a piece of hate mail out through the Internet without its being touched by a gay program. That's kind of funny."

About 15 years ago Allman was preparing the widespread release of Sendmail, a program that enables users to send documents from one network to another. A vastly improved version of Sendmail, refined by Allman over the years, remains the pre- ▶

mier E-mail software used by most major systems today. Without it, for instance, America Online users could send mail only to other America Online users.

McKusick's contributions are a bit more complex but no less significant. The Wilmington, Del., native spent most of the 1980s toiling with other programmers in a laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley, writing and implementing a new computer code for Unix, the basis for the software that now runs network computer systems. Among the innovations created under McKusick's leadership as project manager at Berkeley is the computer's ability to easily locate and recall files after they've been saved and closed. Such elementary tasks, taken for granted by computer users now, were heralded as major breakthroughs not so long ago.

Both men, who are now computer consultants, are featured prominently in *Casting the Net: From Arpanet to Internet and Beyond (Unix and Open Systems Series)*, a history of telecommunications by Peter Salus. In an interview with *The Advocate*, Salus refers to McKusick, 44, and Allman, 42, as a "power couple" and notes that their impact reaches far beyond the on-line world. "There are a lot of straight people who have changed their opinions of gay people because of them," says Salus, who is straight and lives in Boston. "They serve as a good example of a variety of things."

As compatible as McKusick and Allman seem now, it was hardly love at first byte. Back at Berkeley in 1976, when Allman first tried to interface with McKusick about a date, McKusick's closeted response included a menacing look. Three years later McKusick finally scrounged up the courage to cope with his sexuality by attending a gay rap session at Berkeley and found shaggy-haired Allman tossing smug "I knew it" grins from across the semicircle. They bonded over a lengthy chat about computers later that evening and began building a relationship in which each would stake a claim for a piece of cyberspace history.

Technology has been key to their lives. The pair may be the only wine buffs whose 2,000-bottle collection is inventoried on-line and who can check on the temperature of their wine cellar from any modem in the world. "Most people would describe us as computer geeks," Allman admits, proudly noting that their Web page automatically selects a wine of the day from their list. "And yet as computer geeks go, we're fairly normal people. We don't completely dominate our conversation with geek talk."

Neither partner has ever hidden their relationship, a fact McKusick says cost him a prestigious programming job with Hughes Aircraft Co. in Los Angeles in 1981. McKusick worked for the U.S. Air Force contractor for three summers until an executive order signed by President Reagan barred gay men and lesbians from receiving security clearances to work on military projects. (Prior to that order, a Carter administration policy intended to thwart attempts to blackmail gays required McKusick to declare his homosexuality in a newspaper advertisement.)

Still, both men insist that instances of homophobia have been otherwise rare and inconsequential. That may be partly because the computer industry developed in Silicon Valley, just down the coast from the gay mecca of San Francisco. The couple's success made an impact too. Says Salus: "They have created things for users that probably won't get superseded, period. And they're both very nice people."

McKusick and Allman say they have never profited in any large way from their innovations. Rather, they gave away their advances and took satisfaction in aiding in the development of the medium. McKusick in the mid 1980s even passed on joining Berkeley colleague Bill Joy in a start-up programming company—now the multimillion-dollar Sun Microsystems. "One reason Eric and I have stayed together for 18 years is that we've both had the same attitude about money," McKusick says. "It's nice to have some, but it's not what we build our lives around."

Other aspects of their accomplishments satisfy them instead, such as knowing that young gays and lesbians can use the technology they created to access information about sexuality regardless of geography. That's enough for Ben Cottrell, an 18-year-old programmer who noticed Allman's openness as he hung out at the Berkeley computer lab in the early 1990s. Struggling with his own sexuality at age 14, Cottrell E-mailed Allman to tell him he was gay and in need of someone to talk to about it.

The teen now regards Allman and Kirk as his "adopted dads," recalling, "When I walked into their house for the first time, it felt like I was going into a safe space. I felt wanted, accepted. They've produced that feeling for a lot of people."

Allman and McKusick are aware of their role-model status and take its responsibilities seriously. They take credit for starting a practice of pinning pink triangles to their name badges at programmer conventions many years ago, encouraging others to follow their lead. Yet they don't get involved in gay politics much because, they say, they feel constrained by political correctness in the gay movement. "I just decided I had more value to the cause just being known to be gay," Allman says. "We do more just by being ourselves."

It would be difficult to shut down that argument. Their 1993 commitment-ceremony reception brought together a diverse group—hotshots from the computer world, body-pierced gay men and lesbians, suit-and-tie–sporting wine connoisseurs—all for the sake of toasting one of the most influential duos in computer history as they committed to each other for life.

When two straight computer programmers who had worked together in the 1970s spotted each other at the celebration, one was overheard saying to the other, "You know, if someone had told me 20 years ago that the next time we saw each other would be at a gay wedding in Berkeley, I would've told you you're crazy." ∎

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