

New methods to be employed in fight against discrimination

By CAROLYN HOBBS
Of the Emerald

The ordinance for Eugene's Human Rights Commission states it is unlawful to discriminate (meaning any different and unequal treatment), "because of race, color, religion, sex or national origin in employment, housing and public accommodations."

However, putting the law into practice isn't an easy task. Bob Edwards now faces this as newly elected chairman of the commission.

He replaced Dean Owens as chairman on January 28, when elected for the position by the Eugene City Commissioners.

Formed in 1964, the Human Rights Commission is composed of 15 voluntary members who meet the third Tuesday of each month. Each membership appointment lasts three years, and the City Commission makes five new appointments each year.

The members must investigate discrimination complaints by individuals in Eugene, attend Human Rights Commission meetings and work on projects designed to recognize discriminatory practices in Eugene.

But Edwards said most complaints are directed toward employment and housing discrimination, and "most deal with discrimination against minorities" as opposed to sex or religion.

Edward lacks a college degree but his list of community activities is extensive. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he grew up in Indiana and California. After serving in the Armed Forces, Edwards came to Oregon in 1968 and attended Lane Community College. He taught minority studies and the geography of minorities in the U.S. at LCC and started the Black Studies Program and Black Student Union at the College.

The Commission's purpose, as described in its ordinance, may be difficult to implement. But Edwards has definite goals for activating the commission while he is chairman.

He plans to have all members:

—Become involved with community activities. "I want each member to spend two or three hours a month at least with the minority and white community so they'll be more aware of each."

—Read a bibliography of books and articles devised by Edwards.

—Visit minority businesses and talk with the people, "so they'll have a better view of what equal opportunity minority relations is like."

—Form committees in the Commission to deal with problems peculiar to employment, housing and public accommodation. "This will allow some to become experts who are knowledgeable in specific areas the commission is required to handle."

But his plans go beyond procedural changes within the commission itself. Edwards hopes the commission will be more successful in alleviating discrimination in Eugene through "positive means" first, with legal action the second alternative.

By "positive" Edwards means "reaching businesses and the public through education of what the local, state and federal laws against discrimination are. By making them aware of what the Affirmative action Program and Equal Opportunity Employment are."

The Equal Opportunity Employment law of 1964 requires that any business who has 25 or more employees must hire at least one minority employee.

Yet complying with this law and the Affirmative action Program can be profitable for businesses,

and informing owners of these advantages is Edward's intention. "Businesses can get more federal grants if they don't have to worry about discriminatory practices. They don't like the fact that their \$8000 grant is hung up because of one person—a minority person."

Though Edwards feels the positive approach will be most effective, the commission lacks sufficient power to engage in legal suits in most cases.

"It's hard to prove an employer or landlord intentionally discriminated. You have to have an almost open and shut case."

If an individual or the commission feel they have a legitimate case concerning discriminatory practices in Eugene, a complaint is filed which the commission investigates.

Eugene Mayor Les Anderson then appoints three commissioners to evaluate the complaint and the commission's investigation report "to determine if reasonable cause exists to support the allegations of the complaint," according to the Human rights Commission ordinance.

If reasonable cause exists, the three-member panel tries to settle the matter through "conference, conciliation and persuasion." If these efforts fail to settle the matter, it is turned over to the city attorney who decides whether the Human Rights Commission ordinance has been violated.

When discrimination is proven through civil action, the defendant is charged \$100. However, if the defendant is a second or repeated violator of the ordinance, or it is shown that he intentionally and willfully violated the discrimination ordinance, it is a criminal offense. The penalty is a maximum fine of \$500 or imprisonment of 100 days or less.



Bobby Edwards

Yet Edwards pointed out that "legal action takes so much time, the person often drops the complaint. Even if the case is successful, the person usually doesn't want to rent a place or work for a person who has been forced to comply."

How will Edwards help students from being discriminated against?

"I'm a University student. I plan to direct my energy (as commission chairman) primarily toward helping minorities, and if I do that I'll be helping students."

But he added, "If a landlord will let a Black student rent, he'll let any student rent."

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