

## Where have all the politics gone?

by W.C. McRae

The goal of these interviews is to introduce gay Portland to those people who are, in one way or another, its leaders and friends, and to present the history of the movements that affect us now. And into the bargain, hope that if there is more awareness of ourselves as a community, then we might be interested in becoming involved in a movement, and with people, that have been made more familiar.

More interviews forthcoming in future issues of *Just Out*.

### Ben Merrill

Though a native Portlander, Ben Merrill was in the East during the heyday of the PTC. Even so he was familiar with the organization and its accomplishments. When he returned to Portland to establish his legal practice in 1982, he joined the PTC "ready to invest energy." But history had preceeded him: in the wake of the "Forst-Weller estrangement," as Merrill puts it, suspicion and dissension held the day in Portland gay social activism, and certainly in the PTC.

The political aims of the PTC were being assumed by the newly formed Right to Privacy PAC; and Phoenix Rising (PTC Foundation) had taken over the counselling and speaker's bureau. There was little the old PTC could do except harbor memories of the allegations of sexism and racism within its ranks. PTC had outlived its usefulness, he was told.

After his initial, and perhaps naive, enthusiastic investment of energy in PTC, Merrill says he felt that they "gave a picnic and no one came." The decision to dissolve the or-

ganization, and the unpleasant duty of overseeing its dissolution fell to late-comers like Merrill. He recalls it was painful and difficult making decisions, not about going on into the future, but "about how to get out, settle debts, close down."

Earlier this year, in the organizational void surrounding the handling of the Davis referendum, and also feeling a need to address new issues in the community (AIDS, for example), Merrill and Cynthia Cumfer called meetings, ostensibly to discuss civil liberties. The meetings were called for because Merrill felt a lot of energy in the community, but after the first meeting he realized that the energy wasn't suited to high profile political battles. The energy seemed more directed toward working in small groups for manageable, attainable goals. At the second meeting, however, Merrill says a consensus emerged that the organization should become a "clearing house" of interests and groups in the community that would form an "alert force" that could co-ordinate the community and its energy when necessary, and hopefully draw back those who had left the movement during the ructions at PTC. This style of organization is perhaps best, Merrill reflects, if the charges of sexism and racism that plagued PTC are to be avoided.

From the meetings Merrill feels educated about "where people are." He is surprised, though, that people don't seem willing to organize without an issue. Merrill feels, for instance, that the male community will soon begin to encounter a "subtle discrimination" about AIDS. The disease may prove to be the beginning of a new civil liberties issue: Civil liberties can be suspended in only two cases, in the event of war, and in the event of a health crisis. AIDS may well prove to be precisely such a crisis. In England, laws have already been enacted empowering doctors to incarcerate AIDS sufferers in hospitals.

AIDS seems to be involving men more and

more in the effort to raise money for research, and could involve women through volunteer assistance (Merrill sees this as a potential means of "healing the rift" between men and women in the Portland community). He suggests a lesbian blood bank donated for AIDS sufferers. It's a "survival situation" medically and perhaps legally, and one that could and should galvanize the community.

Inasmuch as these issues are being ignored, Merrill fears that the gay and lesbian community has its "head in the sand." We are being naive about the power of the right and the implications of the AIDS crisis. We are resting on the laurels earned by the gay movement in the '70s and we must ask ourselves how many gains have been made since. Merrill draws a parallel with the environmental movement, which has been losing ground recently because of inactivity. "A muscle atrophies when it is not tested," says Merrill. "One must fight the battle when it's there," for the dignity of it, for the good of the soul.

Another of Merrill's general concerns is the oppression of gays by other gays: we make problems for ourselves among ourselves. Gays who are not out are embarrassed by those who are.

It is Merrill's belief that the next step for the movement is perhaps not political, but sociological. Until everyone comes out there can be no substantial progress: every gay person has to confront his family, friends, and fellow workers. Not only is personal freedom the beginning of political freedom, but repressive stereotypes held by the straight community would be shattered if all gay people were out. "Confronting oneself is the beginning of politics" — confronting others is the expression of the inexorability of those politics. One must be secure in oneself before moving on to larger social issues.

as a lawyer for Technical Assistance for Community Services. Subsequently she worked for City Human Resources and works presently for city housing.

Forst had been involved with PTC since coming to Portland in 1976, and was named executive director in 1979. At that time, Forst says, the PTC had difficulty gaining the involvement of women. In fact, women were so wary of being involved in what was perceived to be a male-directed organization that women were told if they would consent to be named to the board, they wouldn't have to attend meetings. According to Forst, prior to her directorship the PTC had become ridden with main-stream values. Women and minority gays felt that there was little representation of their needs or feelings, or room for their involvement at a meaningful level in PTC.

But the appointment of Forst to the executive position brought the involvement of many "strong women" to the organization and introduced new feminist values into its agenda. The PTC still continued its legislative direction — the gay rights bill in Salem (against, at least in 1979, the advice of friendly law-makers) — but under Forst's leadership the PTC wanted to "change directions," to move more at the grass roots level.

Forst warns that it is too easy to talk of the situation in the old PTC as "women versus men." In the gay community, and in the gay political arena specifically, the problem is not men against women, but between "feminists" — women or men who have jettisoned conventional social roles and hierarchical politics — and "old boys" — mainstream men or women whose values and goals are complicit with conventional social and political structures. Men as well as women can be feminist; just as women as well as men can suffer from "testosterone poisoning."

The PTC became increasingly factionalized as the PTC Foundation absorbed money and allegiances away from the PTC. And the gay community factioned off into those whose concerns were legislative and those who were more community oriented.

Finally, in 1981, Forst left the executive position of the PTC "the most burned out I've ever been in my life."

Gay men and lesbians "have at best a fragile alliance." That is to say, they share a common enemy. But given a general consensus on goals to be pursued, Forst says women are prepared to work with men under the right conditions. Women want to make sure that they aren't overcome and that they don't become trapped in a male-dominated organization. "This is the third wave," Forst says, referring to the group called together by Ben Merrill and Cynthia Cumfer, "We want to do it better."

Forst is willing to become involved in a new organization, "but much," she says, "depends on leadership." People are needed who can coalesce divergent aims and personalities and provide direction, without pursuing power for its own sake, for self-advancement; and without becoming immersed in the priorities of money, power bargaining, and organizational details.

Women are willing to work with men toward a common goal if the values of women are represented, and if effective but considered leadership is given. Forst says she doesn't judge men perform. She mostly feels sadness that the difficulties that she in particular has had with men in leadership couldn't have been worked out. She wouldn't again, she claims, work in an organization similar to the old PTC. And she reminds that any new group — the "library group" for instance — "won't go" unless men do become involved: women already have other groups among themselves to pursue much the same agenda. "Who needs another group to attend?" Forst, and other women are willing to become involved, but she "is going in with her eyes open."

**CITY NIGHTS**  
Presents

**PORTLAND'S BEST PLUS**

San Francisco's  
**Sylvester!**

Portland's  
Hottest  
Summer  
**DOWNTOWN DANCE PARTY**  
& Benefit!

**SATURDAY NIGHT**  
**JULY 20th**

9pm ON  
**ERICKSON'S HISTORIC BAR**  
7 NW 2nd

**Advance Tickets \$15 or:**

Dugan's, Dudley's Records, Peruse on 21st, Turntable Mary's, Teasers Fish Grotto, Embers/Avenue, and City Nights Box 10663 Portland 97210

BENEFIT FOR OREGON AIDS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Produced By The City Nights Group Po Box 10663 Portland 97210  
Independent Benefit Events For The Gay People of Oregon Facing AIDS

### Mary Forst

For many women and members of minorities, says Mary Forst, working in the mainstream — even if that mainstream is gay politics — is irrelevant, because to that mainstream, "we are irrelevant."

This mistrust of mainstream politics and political motives results from her experience as the executive director of the Portland Town Council from 1979 to 1981.

Forst came to Oregon from Detroit in 1973, to clerk at the Court of Appeals in Salem. But it wasn't until 1976 that she moved to Portland where she worked initially

The finest imported coffee beans, teas, chocolates and beverage brewing accessories.



**The Coffee Merchant**

**THE BROADWAY COFFEE MERCHANT**  
1637 N.E. Broadway  
Portland, OR 97232 ■ 284-9209

**THE HAWTHORNE COFFEE MERCHANT**  
3562 S.E. Hawthorne  
Portland, OR 97214 ■ 230-1222