

Stevie Remington: A national treasure in our own backyard

Prospects for passage of HB 2325 are good; primarily because ACLU Executive Director Stevie Remington's skills, grace and political savvy assure it a favorable hearing

BY RODGER LARSON

We need the support of people in the Portland Metropolitan area, but who we really need to contact their representatives are your Aunt Millie and Uncle Harry in Prineville or Gold Beach." Stevie Remington, Executive Director of Oregon American Civil Liberties Union, made this remark at the ACLU kick-off rally held at the Metropolitan Community Church on January 22nd. She was referring to the need to lobby state representatives from the more remote, more conservative, parts of the state in support of House Bill 2325 which would guarantee civil rights to lesbians and gay men in Oregon.

It struck me as amusing at the time that in appearance Stevie Remington *could be* your Aunt Millie. But although she might appear to be sheltered and retiring, the image is deceiving. Under the dark black carefully coiffed hair of Stevie Remington is a brilliant mind which sees civil liberties issues clearly and which knows and understands the legal and political workings of the state intimately. Her mild manner disguises a strong will to get things done.

These qualities, coupled with incredible energy, dedication, and drive make Stevie Remington one of the most powerful and influential friends gays and lesbians could have. Sarah Cook, a local activist and PSU Women's Studies instructor described Stevie Remington as "A national treasure right here in our own back yard, and most people don't even know about her!" I rather agree with Sarah, however for me a national treasure conjures up notions of a museum and Stevie is far too active and vital for that image. Her reputation and influence are far-reaching even if most people on the street don't recognize her name.

It is understandable, in one way, that more people don't know who Stevie is — she is very modest. "It was not acceptable or proper in my family to receive praise or notoriety. It's part of my childhood values that I am trying to overcome; it's a real hang-up I have. It was important to do good work and help others but you weren't to be praised or acknowledged for your effort."

These values were part of growing up as an only child in Dora, New Mexico. Stevie describes her hometown: "Dora is located in the high plains just a few miles west of the Texas border at the intersection of a straight road running north and south and one running east and west."

"How does one get here from there?" I asked.

Several incidents in Stevie's life brought her to the position of Executive Director of Oregon ACLU. She was a precocious child and read a lot. She skipped several grades in grammar school and would have skipped more but her father, fearing that she would be too young to be so far ahead in school, put a stop to it. That was not the only time that her father, seeking to protect her, put an obstacle in her path.

When it was time to enter college, Stevie's father sat her down to discuss her future career possibilities. There was a war raging in Europe and Stevie's father suggested that people on that continent would need help rebuilding: Help in developing better nutrition and organizing their lives. There would be a great need for Home Economists. Pursuing such a career would be practical and would avoid running up against sex discrimination. So convincing was her father that when she entered Colorado State University at Fort Collins, majoring in Home Economics, she thought it had been her idea all along.

Her father had done a good job of fooling her. Years later Stevie's mother confided to her that her father had manipulated her. He believed that Stevie was especially gifted in journalism, political science, and economics, but these were all fields that were not suited for women. Even journalism was suspect because it was so strongly tied to politics and hence not a field for respectable women.

Stevie's parents still live in Dora; her mother is 86 and her father is 90. Her father still doesn't know that she knows he manipulated her into the Home Economics curriculum.

It was a college friend, June Suzuki, however, who had the most profound effect on Stevie during this part of her life. June was the daughter of immigrant Japanese parents, and as a first generation Japanese American she was devoted to her country in a deeply personal and emotional way. Her family were hard working and industrious truck farmers in the Los Angeles Basin. They became wealthy and prominent in their community.

When the United States entered World War II, June and her family were required to report to a concentration camp in Colorado. Given only twenty-four hours notice, they lost their home and their possessions. The Suzukis were transported to Colorado in a freight car with no toilet facilities. The train stopped in Arizona for the Japanese American citizens to relieve themselves. When June ran to find a bush for privacy she was confronted by soliders with bayonets who forced her back to the train.

Stevie's home was too far from college for her to go there for Thanksgiving. June invited her to have Thanksgiving with her family in the concentration camp. Stevie was anxious to go, but she told her father of her plans and he forbade it, fearing for her safety. She reluctantly obeyed her father, but her friendship with June remained strong. June's family's circumstances affected Stevie deeply and helped form the part of her character that makes her a crusader for people's civil rights today.

After college Stevie was married and had two of her four children while she helped put her husband through graduate school in Forestry and Wildlife Management. After his education was completed, they moved to the Vancouver, B.C. area where he was part of a joint U.S./Canadian effort in an experimental forestry wildlife

management project. He was away from home, in the bush, for nine months out of the year and Stevie was essentially the head of a single-parent family.

It was from this vantage point — an American living outside the U.S. — that Stevie witnessed the McCarthy era. Factions in the U.S. were hysterically searching the population for communist infiltrators and sympathizers. The colleges and the universities were targeted as hot beds of communist corruption. People in the arts were suspected, threatened, and blacklisted. Many lives and careers were ruined. Once again Stevie could see the injustice of innocent American citizens being denied their basic civil rights.

In 1960 Stevie's husband took a job with Portland Power and Light, and they moved to Southwest Portland. She knew that she wanted to do political work and soon became active in The League of Women Voters. She served as the local president from 1963 to 1965. Stevie made many connections through the League and when it became apparent the ACLU needed a woman on its board of directors Stevie was asked to accept the position. She agreed.

Stevie decided to go back to school for an advanced degree in Political Science. However, no school in Oregon offered such a program at the time. She talked to her friend, Charlie White, a professor at Portland State University. He discouraged her from working on a masters degree in Social Science. Stevie had hoped to teach at the college level, but Charlie told her that sex discrimination was so entrenched in college Social Science departments that she would never be hired unless she were willing to move across the country.

Again Stevie pared down her ambitions and set out to get a degree to teach high school History. Even before she completed her degree she was asked to join a team-taught program in Modern Problems at David Douglas High School. She stayed with this program for a while and then moved to Jackson High School where she also team-taught Modern Problems.

During this time Stevie remained active in the ACLU. She was a delegate to the 1970 bi-annual conference. While at the conference, Charlie Davis, who was chair of the Oregon Board, asked Stevie to retire from her teaching job and assume the position of Executive Director of Oregon ACLU. Once again, Stevie accepted the ACLU's offer.

The project most important to Stevie Remington right now is the passage of House Bill 2325. The project is also very important to the gay men and lesbians of Oregon, because it is the bill submitted to the state legislature by the American Civil Liberties Union which would guarantee rights of sexual minorities in the areas of employment, housing, and public education.

Prospects for passage of the bill are good. One major reason for the bright outlook for the bill's future is Stevie Remington, whose skills, grace, and political savvy assure it a favorable hearing. It is, indeed, time for her to overcome her hang-up about receiving praise and notoriety and be recognized publicly for her remarkable intelligence, energy and dedication. She is a great asset to all Oregonians, and the gay men and lesbians of the state are indeed fortunate to have her working on our side.

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