

Kathy Gillette: making a difference

It takes a whole lot of people making a whole lot of effort to get things to move just a little bit. And I'm just one of those people out there

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

You can't spot an activist by the size of her megaphone.

Kathy Gillette is proof.

There are the visible, highly vocal members of the lesbian community, the ones who vault into a kind of local stardom. Then there are dozens who work more quietly, steadily turning

Profile

their skills toward a cause they believe in.

Kathy Gillette is one of them.

Gillette's sense of social responsibility brought her to Portland as a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in 1977. She stayed — and has since helped nurture the lesbian and gay community with talents ranging from drumming to number-crunching.

When she's not working at Tektronix, Gillette serves as treasurer of the Right to Privacy Political Action Committee and as co-chair of the Counseling Center for Sexual Minorities. She's umpired softball and basketball for the city and the public schools for 11 years; she drummed for the group Sister Tomato in its first nine months.

Gillette's face is earnest as she describes her work. A cheerful, thoughtful manner underscores her belief about social change: that it must begin, bit by slow bit, in your own backyard.

"As a Jesuit volunteer, I worked in a victims' assistance program in the 'Skid Road' area. I was working with people who'd been rolled, or beaten up, trying to get those people into the court system and get the attackers off the street. It really ended up being a lot of work. I was one of many of us our volunteer-year who moved here and stayed.

"Now I'm an accountant at Tektronix. But actually I'll be going on a leave of absence at the end of May, so I'll be doing . . . I don't know what I'll be doing. I may end up, for a year, just trying to be self-supporting, do a lot of tax work next year and pick up some accounting work in between.

"After my JVC year, I worked for a few different agencies, and what seemed real clear was that there were people who were very good at social service work, who had good ideas, but who didn't really know anything about running a program. They weren't good at managing, bookkeeping, accounting, fund-raising . . . and I seemed to have a knack for doing that fairly well. So my original intention in going back to

school and getting an accounting degree was ultimately so I would have those skills to use either in a job or as a kind of sideline, but in the social justice aspect.

"What happened was that Portland State directs you when you get your degree. They really think the good students will want to be CPAs for 'Big Eight' firms. I interviewed for a few firms and went through that, and wasn't real interested in them. I got a job with Tektronix. For as big a company as it is, it seems to have [the sense] that there's more out there than just making as many dollars as you can and sending military goods overseas.

"It's certainly a very different world, and it has its allure. I mean, it's a nice, steady income. But you drive to and from work every day, and you spend your eight or nine hours there, and sometimes 10 or 12, and get your two weeks of vacation every year. So it's time for a change. I'll have a year to decide what I want to do.

"I've usually had beliefs that were a little left of center, not the totally radical. I don't think I ever put a Lesbian and Gay Pride poster up at work, but I had International Women's Day posters and Fallen Angel Choir posters . . . and I have certainly had discussions with a lot of people about those events. And I think, if nothing else, I've carried a little bit of that consciousness to people who may not have the opportunity to talk about those things outside of work. But ultimately, if you're out there trying to change the world . . . I mean, Tek is going to be selling to defense contractors no matter how long I work there and no matter how much of an issue I raise about it."

If major change seems impossible in Gillette's work environment, it is at least plausible in her efforts outside of work. The Right to Privacy PAC, a statewide gay rights group, uses money to mold political change. Recently the group contributed more than \$6,000 to the state Senate campaign of Shirley Gold. Her opponent, Rod Monroe, had the Right to Privacy PAC's approval until his 1983 vote against a gay rights bill.

"One of the things I'm doing right now is being treasurer to the Right to Privacy PAC. So I've had some opportunity to do that kind of [social service] work. In those two worlds, there are always some people that you connect with. There's a couple people at work — a lesbian and a gay man — and we always kind of check in and talk community events and community gossip. So you make the connections. And that's refreshing . . . yeah, it is difficult. But I also have to admit that there's a part of me that enjoys the perks of the job of being an accountant.

"[Being on the Right to Privacy PAC board]



Photo by Anndee Hochman

seemed like an appropriate thing to do. Certainly, when you're writing checks, you can make comments about how appropriate they are, the things you're paying money for. I think it's real important that there be women as a presence on the board. It's surprising how many women make donations to that PAC. Right now that's the only vehicle for lesbians and gay men to donate money for politics in the state of Oregon with their names attached to it. For women to be on the board and to be involved in that organization is pretty crucial — knowing that the money coming in goes out to support issues that lesbians support.

"I think there are probably some women who are hesitant to get involved with a male-dominated group. It's time-consuming, too. A lot of times, women are just economically trying to make it, you know. The women probably have 60 or 70 percent as much income as the men on the board. A lot of men on the board have well-paying jobs and don't have to worry about bills. A lot of the women have children. A lot of the men don't have children. Some of them don't have relationships. For women, the PAC may not be a primary place that they want to put their energy. It's understandable.

"With fund-raising, one of the things you have to recognize is that women will probably give as often as men will. In fact, we may give more often. Maybe we can't give as much. But it's nice to see that women are maybe feeling better about making money and using it as a tool, because that's really what it is. It's a way to do some things. It's a way of making your family comfortable; it's a way of providing for your retirement; it's a way of providing for your community. Volunteer labor's wonderful, but it doesn't pay the rent, it doesn't pay the heating bill, and it doesn't buy the stamps. Somewhere you've got to have the money.

"I guess if I had a comment to make about the history of the women's community, the lesbian community, it's that people have often taken offense at the idea of there being money around. I don't know how to put that. But there are women who choose . . . whatever their profession is, and they don't have the time for organizations, but they are willing to donate the money. I think that's true of men or women. It's

good to recognize that those women are out there, and that it is OK to ask them for money.

"Somewhere when I was growing up, something hooked in there for me about 'You do what you can to make the world a better place,' in whatever the context. It takes a whole lot of people making a whole lot of effort to get things to move just a little bit. And I'm just one of those people out there.

"I think the community's a lot more visible [than it was 10 years ago]. One way to look at it is to look at the number of people and the number of organizations, say, at a gay pride celebration. When Portland Town Council was putting it on, you had maybe 10 groups and 500 people at the march, and maybe another 500 at the rally. And now there will be 1,000. In the rain. And 30 groups. And so many organizations for people to hook into. Not quite like San Francisco, where they have Left-Handed Women Against Cruelty to Opossums. At the same time, maybe there was more cohesiveness when we did all work together, instead of this fragmentation. You wonder if we're going to still be fighting these same battles when we're in our 80s.

"The sad thing is that issues around AIDS have maybe enabled us to work together a little more, to set aside some real differences. For instance, I went to a meeting recently for the Names Project. And there was none of the posturing or bantering that would go on years ago when a group of people came together. It was real clear to everybody that the quilt was coming to Portland, and we would get it here and organize, instead of 'Well, this person has this point of view and that person has that point of view, and we can't make it work.'

"People are much more out there and more public. It's so nice that people can be open, and we can get more stories about the community in the newspaper, and you can let people find out that we're really not that much different from the people who go to Hinson Baptist every Sunday. We worry about our children, whether they're going to the right schools, about the drug dealer's house in the neighborhood, about crime . . . there's a lot of commonality. Folks who would like to think that we're just ogres out there molesting children, if they'd realize we have a lot more in common than different . . . well, that's the hope. So if someone can be out in the neighborhood, they've got a half dozen neighbors who know they're gay. And suddenly those half dozen people realize that it doesn't make a difference.

"That may ultimately be where more change takes place than in all of our organizations in the world."

Gillette knows that Tektronix will not alter its corporate conscience because of her. Her work with the Right to Privacy PAC will not end discrimination. But there are signs of change; there is cause for hope. She has noticed that girls, even junior-high-school girls, are playing much better basketball than they did ten years ago. Really beautiful basketball, a treat to watch.

Kathy Gillette is grinning at the thought. •

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