

Tom Norton: full-time volunteer

"Getting the bills passed is going to take fighting the battle in mainstream politics. But because we live in such a fast-food, I-want-it-now society, people are less willing to put up with the bullshit in politics."

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

When AIDS came along and showed the gay community about fragile life and arbitrary death, Tom Norton already knew. He knew 11 years ago, when he walked away — dazed, but on his feet — from a helicopter crash that killed one man and left a woman passenger with every major bone in her body broken.

Profile

In Vietnam, too, where he'd flown a medical evacuation plane, death moved in quick and dirty. No time for dying. You were there — and then you were gone.

So Tom Norton decided each second mattered. It sounds like a cliché, but Norton doesn't just preach the idea, he lives it. He rises at 5 am because sleeping in makes him feel guilty. He jumps in wholeheartedly where other people dabble. Right now he's volunteering for Oregonians for Fairness. Full time. Others donate what money they can scrape together; Norton took out a bank loan so he could give the OFF campaign several thousand dollars.

It's not just a sense of the future's uncertainty that drives him. The past nudges him, too — and a patient, playful awareness of how long real change requires. He lives in the house where he was conceived, where his grandmother lived — a beautiful home with dark wood moldings and a lawn crammed with flowers. Once he rode a tricycle on this porch. He knows how things shift, slowly, through generations.

Norton wears an easy smile on an open, almost childlike face. His dogs, Pal and Buddy, scuffle in his lap until he quiets them with a "Settle down, boys." Life is good, and the glorious seconds tick along too fast. Ask him how he is, and he says, "Super."

Tom Norton means it.

"I grew up in a real politically active family, so I came from a background of activism and involvement and caring about more than just myself. Back in 1977, I was a helicopter pilot, and I had an accident up in Alaska. I had a stroke as a result of the accident, and it paralyzed my left side, so I'm not able to fly anymore. I loved my job. You know, I'd jump out of bed in the morning, eager to go to work, and they'd have to tell me to go home at night and not to come in on the weekends. I even felt guilty about getting paid. I couldn't understand why they would pay people to do what they had dreamed of doing their whole life.

"I was conceived in this house and lived here for two years, then my father was transferred to a small town near Salem, where I went to grade school. Then he was transferred to Corvallis, where I went to high school. And then, after high school, I joined the Army to learn to fly. Three years in the Army, a year and a half in Vietnam, and I got out of the Army and went to college in Eugene at the University of Oregon. I was a premed student. I got into medical school, but a month before I was supposed to start, I decided that my real love was flying. I wanted to fly.

"Portland was my home. I was just a seasonal pilot. I'd go up [to Alaska] and work from April to September and earn a year's wages in that amount of time. I had the stroke in Ketchikan, Alaska, where the accident was. And then they airmailed me down to Seattle, where I was in the hospital for about a month. Then I got shipped down here to the Rehabilitation Institute of Oregon, which is part of Good Samaritan Hospital, where I learned to walk again and put on a T-shirt and deal with being disabled. Then I came home from there.

"So there I was, with a lot of free time on my hands. I was receiving workers' compensation, so I had adequate income. I didn't have to work. That left me a lot of time for volunteerism, which I was prone to do anyway. That was sort of back in the heyday of gay politics, the Anita Bryant days. The Portland Town Council was a very active organization.

"It seems like I was a full-time volunteer down at Portland Town Council. Back in those days, we had a minimum one night a week that was volunteer night. And sometimes it seemed like every night we had a volunteer night. We had a lot of mailings; we had a newsletter. There was lots going on. We were working hard on the passage of a gay rights bill.

"There was a lot happening locally. Neil Goldschmidt was the mayor. It was the stage when Portland was just really coming alive; it was the birth of sexual freedom and gay freedom in Portland because it was a safe place to live and a fun place to live. It was also the birth of an active and open lesbian community here. It's my feeling that there are actually more lesbians in Portland than there are gay men. You just don't see them as much; they tend to be more underground than the gay men. Unfortunately, it's still a male-dominated society. It's a sad fact of life that will have to change over time. Social change comes ever so slow. It takes generations, I think.

"I was primarily active in Portland Town Council. I was doing other community things,



Photo by Anndee Hochman

too. I delivered Meals on Wheels to the elderly for seven years, and I was chair of the Southeast Portland Senior Citizens' Advisory Council. I visited nursing homes. . . . Gay involvement — well, that was before the days of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus. About that time, the Town Council Foundation was born, which is now Phoenix Rising. Things happened so fast. It was like the gay movement was born and all of a sudden it ended — I guess, when Reagan was elected.

"Even in my short lifetime I see things being really cyclical. It's nature, you know; everything swings up and down, and back and forth. Time goes so fast. I usually keep so busy and active that it's very disappointing, because weeks turn into days, and months turn into weeks, and years turn into months. It just scares me — where the time goes.

"I'm a full-time volunteer now at Oregonians for Fairness, the 'No on 8' campaign. I get up at five o'clock, between five and six, and go down to the gym. Then I come home, have a light breakfast and go down to the OFF office and spend the day there. The campaign is a real watershed issue, and I feel very strongly about it. I think it's a winnable campaign.

"I'm more active now than I was [when I was a pilot] — in a different way. It was a lifestyle that I really enjoyed. I really enjoyed being a helicopter pilot because it was a childhood dream; it gave me a real sense of identity. And I was very lucky to survive the accident. My helicopter hit the ground straight in at over 100 miles an hour, and I walked away from it. The guy sitting right next to me was killed instantly, and the woman sitting next to him — closer to me than you are now — had every major bone in her body broken. She survived, and I walked away from it. I'm just lucky to be here and be alive at all.

"For the last 11 years, it always seemed like something in my life was missing. And I didn't know what. Something wasn't working quite right. So for the last two years, I've really put a lot of time and work and effort into personal growth and getting my life in order.

"Out of all that work I realized that when the helicopter crashed, I came out alive, but actually, I sort of stopped living. For the last 11 years, I've been trying to live the life of that person who was alive before the moment of impact. So here I am, a 38-year-old man trying

to be a 27-year-old helicopter pilot who *can't fly*. No wonder my life doesn't work.

"So now that I've discovered that all of a sudden it's like I had this great clearing in my life. I'm free. I can go beyond that and start a new life, almost. Actually, I'm a far better person now than I was before, anyway. I had a lot of growing up to do. So now I have a chance to really go far beyond that. I've even put in two applications for work — for Northwest Airlines and Delta Airlines. If I do go back to work, it will cut into a lot of the volunteering time.

"[With the OFF campaign] there's a certain sense of organization, a substructure that was already here, so it wasn't really hard to try to throw this campaign together. There was a real willingness to organize and fight this thing head-on. One thing I have noticed: a lot of people have a certain sense of frustration, a lot of people are tired and fed up with mainstream politics. I can appreciate that. I feel a certain sense of frustration, too.

"Getting the bills passed is going to take fighting the battle in mainstream politics. But because we live in such a fast-food, I-want-it-now society, people are less willing to put up with the bullshit in politics. They want it now, and I don't blame them. I want more than we've received. But even if a gay rights bill is passed, that's not going to stop people from being bigoted. Those kinds of changes take much longer.

"As I've grown older and become more settled, more established, however you want to say it, I'm more aware of a real silent underground, a large group of gay men and lesbians who don't seem to be active, who just sort of take life as it is and don't really care much about social change. They're afraid to rock the boat. It would be very easy for me to fall into that category, too. I have a nice home, a nice income. So there's no call for me to be active and do what I do. I just do it because I have a real strong sense that I don't want young people to grow up with the same kind of fears that I had. And I guess the way to do that is to work toward social change.

"I just noticed that one thing I haven't talked about at all is AIDS. I know that, in some ways, it has brought the community together. It's changed the lifestyle and habits of gay men, primarily. It certainly made us look at the reality of death. After I crashed in the helicopter, and I was sort of in a daze around the wreckage, and the rescue chief showed up, I looked at him and said, 'I didn't think it would be me.' You know. Accidents always happen to somebody else; they never happen to you. So we just have to be ready in our lives.

"I got that attitude primarily when I was a medical evacuation helicopter pilot in Vietnam. I was only 19 years old, and I was in Vietnam being a medevac pilot. I saw a lot of death, and so I really learned how fragile life is, how valuable every moment is.

"I've always been a happy person. My mother said I was laughing when I was born, that when they put me on her stomach, I looked up at her, giggling and laughing. And I've been that way my whole life."

Barbara G. Isaacs, Ph.D.

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