

John Baker: Politics and opportunity

The harder we work and the more we show that we are willing to be participating members of society and work real hard for what we think is right, we'll be very successful

BY ANDEE HOCHMAN

John Baker, the chair of Oregon's Right to Privacy Political Action Committee, may spend much of his spare time neck-deep in politics. But at home, he seems miles away from the legendary smoke-filled rooms where laws and political careers are forged.

In the living room of his Southwest Portland home, a large Christmas tree spans

Profile

floor to ceiling, its branches dangling a lifelong collection of ornaments. Baker relaxes in an armchair, dressed in jeans, a sweater and lived-in brown weejuns, his gray hair combed off a high forehead. Behind him, a set of brass scales, the old-fashioned kind with hanging pans, stands on a sidepiece.

The scales form a fitting backdrop, because John Baker, 43, brings a voice of balance and moderation to the political fray. Born in Beaverton, he worked his way up through the activist ranks, starting by licking envelopes for the Portland Town Council when he was 18. In the meantime, he built an 18-year career as a right-of-way agent for the state highway division. He speaks softly, earnestly, punctuating his responses with an ingenuous 'Oh, gosh!'

Baker is an optimist; he sees a glass half full of progress for gays and lesbians in this state where others see the half empty loss last November on Ballot Measure 8. His brand of politics boils down to a simple, practical essence: The Right to Privacy PAC exists to raise the kind of big money that gets people elected. Those people, once in office, remember who helped them. And gay-positive legislation inches forward.

Baker looks back at this decade-and-a-half in Portland politics and sees movement, a community less divided within itself than it used to be, a community that is perhaps finding some internal balance.

John Baker twines his hands in his lap. Behind him, the antique brass scales hang steady in the quiet room.

"I've been involved in politics ever since I was a teenager. Politics has always been a hobby. Some issues that affected me were the war in Vietnam... and I was always a very strong supporter of the Kennedys. I really took to heart John Kennedy's phrase about 'Ask not what your country can do for you.'

"Portland Town Council was started about two years before I got involved with it. I did a lot of licking of envelopes — the way anybody gets involved with anything. And after several years, I ran for the board and served on it. About that time I was a founding member and co-chair of the Town Council Foundation, which turned into Phoenix Rising.

"Then about four or five of us founded the Right to Privacy PAC in, I think, 1981. There was a Portland Town Council PAC in the late

1970s. As I recall, it was the first gay and lesbian PAC in the entire country. For some reason, it didn't last very long. Then several people got together and decided we would put together another PAC. By that time, there were several of them around the country and they were very successful.

"The issues have changed drastically. Back in the mid-1970s, we were all very naive about what politics was and what we could do. I remember one of the first Portland Town Council benefits for a politician was at Victoria's Nephew and I think we charged a dollar or two dollars at the door. It was a benefit for Gretchen Kafoury and Vera Katz. I think, if we were lucky, we raised 50 bucks.

"We assumed that we just never could raise money, we never could become big players in politics. Back then, lesbians and gays didn't do stuff like that. That's certainly changed. No more dollar-a-plate dinners. And obviously, the issues have changed. Unfortunately, we have to deal with AIDS. I think we have all become much more sophisticated about the things that are most important to us.

"It used to be that we thought the gay rights bill, which we always talked about, was the most important thing in the world. Now maybe it's just the existence of really strong gay organizations that says something to us about our worth and says something to society, that we are a group of people who are going to stand up for certain values.

"We're going off now into different directions than I thought we would. I never dreamed that the idea of whether lesbians and gays could actually marry would be an issue, and now in the late 1980s it's turning into an issue, with domestic partnership and [the legalization of gay marriage] in Denmark.

"I think the Right to Privacy PAC has probably been mainstreaming ever since the organization was started. We feel very strongly that lesbian and gay issues should be well represented in the political spectrum. So to that extent, we have mainstreamed; we keep pushing it. But at the same time, we have to be cognizant and understanding of the various segments of the gay and lesbian community. Which a lot of people don't like to do.

"I think you can mainstream, but at the same time you don't necessarily have to advertise the various segments of the community. Like you don't push the fact that gay rights is specifically for the drag community. The drag community happens to be very important to the gay community, but we're not specifically looking at gay rights as being rights for just one segment of the community.

"We can mainstream and at the same time be very aware of our own community.

"I think that the last couple of years have been very positive, and we have been very successful. More than I ever imagined. A lot of people will disagree with me, but I think that Ballot Measure 8 was almost a win rather than a loss. We gained so much — an opportunity to be able to tell people in the



state who lesbians and gays are and what we want out of life, which is obviously the same things everybody else wants. A chance to live our lives safely and securely and as enjoyably as possible. We did a very good job of that. We didn't win the election, but I think that had we not put that energy and time and money into that campaign, the polls probably would have shown that we were even less popular.

"I think it was very successful and that it led to our successes in the legislature this year. It showed legislators that we really are concerned about our rights and are willing to work very hard. That confidence they had in us paid off, and I think it's going to pay off in the future, too. I think that the harder we work and the more we show the legislature and people in the state that we are willing to be participating members of society and work real hard for what we think is right, that we'll be very successful.

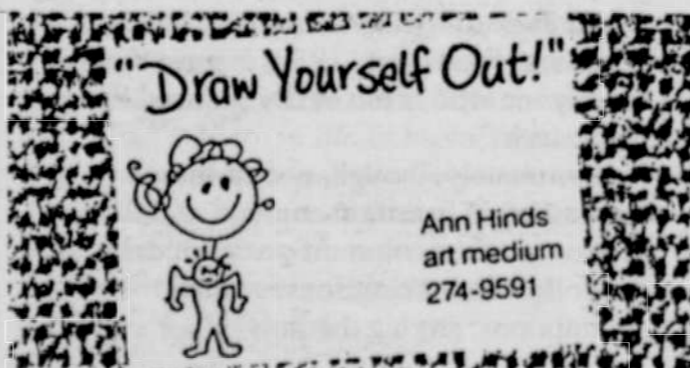
"Now we can do a dinner and raise \$50,000. I think that indicates that people are very supportive of what we do and of what the gay rights movements means. I think people are much more willing nowadays to get involved in things. Years ago, people thought that a bunch of left-wing crazies and socialists were staffing the gay rights movement. I'm sure there were such people. Most of us are probably to the left of George Bush. But basically, we have been very, very responsible in the last 15 years. People realize that. That's why we can do a benefit and get 700 people to attend.

"The point of doing the Lucille Hart dinner at \$75 a plate is to raise money. To raise big, big sums of money. It's one of the best ways, one of the easiest ways, to do that. There are a lot of people who can't afford \$75. So we do other things. We have at least one summer benefit, a garden party, and the price on that is \$25. We also do a series of monthly events at the Mallory Hotel. We have a speaker. We don't make any money on that, but it's important that people have a forum to discuss issues and be able to talk to candidates and be a part of the gay political movement.

"In the past 10 or 15 years it seems like the diversity in the community sometimes made it very difficult for people to work together. And one of the things I've really appreciated seeing happen is that people work together much better now than they ever have before.

"I feel very comfortable working with almost anybody. I don't know that I would be actively involved with an organization like ACT UP, but certainly all the people who are involved with it are people I could call and talk to. I think in the last couple of years we've all matured and sort of grown up on that issue."

Please & thank you aren't the only magic words:
When supporting our advertisers mention
Just Out.



CLEARANCE
SALE
END OF DECADE

THIS IS THE END OF THE EIGHTIES,
NEARLY THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM!
TIME FOR A BIG CLEARANCE SALE
YOU WILL SEE MAJOR SAVINGS ON

**BIKES, CLOTHING, TRAINERS
& MORE!**

DON'T MISS THIS ONE!
STARTS DEC. 26, 1989

OLD TOWN
PORTLAND
35 NW 3RD AVE.
227-3535

CICLO
SPORT SHOP

LAKE OSWEGO
DOWNTOWN
91 S. STATE ST.
636-3521

**FINALLY, SOME
GOOD-NEWS
ABOUT AIDS...**

- ▼ Drugs are being developed that can slow development of AIDS. Some of these drugs are being used now.
- ▼ Treatments are available to prevent some AIDS-related illnesses.
- ▼ You have choices!

But first you must find out if you are infected with HIV, the virus that can cause AIDS.

If you haven't taken the HIV antibody test, or if it's been awhile... consider it again.

Call your local health department or the Oregon AIDS Hotline at 223-AIDS (Portland), or 1-800-777-AIDS.

IT'S UP TO YOU!

PEOPLE UNITED AGAINST AIDS
Brought to you by the Oregon Health Division and Cascade AIDS Project.

DOWNEY
INSURANCE AGENCY, INC.

Bridget I. Downey
P.O. Box 40626
Portland, OR 97240
610 S.W. Broadway, #408
(503) 228-8327