

Donna Russell Red Wing

*Visibility in the community is going to be a real challenge.
Enlarging and expanding what we can offer to people.
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but the community.*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Welcome to Lesbian Community Project headquarters, where the phone rings several times an hour and a copy machine the size of a Volkswagon is chewing up the paper and spitting it out. Creased sheets of the January newsletter, copy machine casualties, fill a trash can. In other parts of the spacious Union Station office sit dozens of files, membership lists and pledges, the blank eye of the AT&T computer.

Profile

Donna Russell Red Wing glances around the room, grins like a moon on its way to full and says she feels giddy. In her first days as executive director of Portland's Lesbian Community Project, she has pored through mail and files, figured out how to answer about half of the phone callers' questions and arrived home each day happily saturated with her new responsibilities.

Red Wing, A New England native, talks a fast and effusive stream, a Boston accent propping her A's open wide. She wears a labrys in her right ear, a bright scarf swooped around the neck of a black sweater and blue jeans, a welcome change from the power suits her last job required.

She talks excitedly about the Northwest's stunning landscape, the house she and her partner managed to find in less than five hours, the New Year's Eve party at the Echo Theater, the Lesbian Community Project itself, unthinkable in her former Massachusetts town.

She looks past the office clutter to the high windows, where trains chug in and out. It's a typical January day, deep gray clouds battling a pale sun. A Portland native might not see anything remarkable. But to Red Wing, it is all new; every piece a challenge.

"Before this, I was the director of a child abuse prevention program in Worcester, Massachusetts, about 40 miles west of Boston. As a prevention program, we primarily worked with children from two-and-a-half to 18, teaching them how to protect themselves.

"It's the kind of work that is important to do, but I think you can give so much of yourself and then you have to pull back. Because there's no more to give. I think the work here is important, but it's much more upbeat.

"For 20 years Portland has been my favorite city. While I was last visiting here, I thought, 'Gosh, I'd love to live here.' And I thought: why not? My son is a young adult; he's on the road with his band, so as a mother I didn't need to be there every day.

"When I got home my partner and I decided to get The Oregonian. The first issue we got advertised this job. I thought: fundraising, special events, legislative work — all the stuff I do, all in one job. This is wonderful. It was the only job I looked at, the only job I wanted and the only job I applied

for. It was meant to be.

"New England is changing. The pace is much faster. The cost of living is tremendous. For working-class people, Massachusetts has just become unlivable. Portland is clean and wonderful and has fountains everywhere. It's a friendly, really positive place.

"The job is a combination of the things that I do best. I also believed in the work of LCP. It's a pro-active organization; it's an organization that's out there. I don't think an LCP could survive in my home town. To find that here is really exciting. It's comfortable — for me, for my lifestyle — to work primarily with women, to work primarily with dykes.

"I do know that after all of the welcomes and the excitement, there's some real hard work to do. Fundraising, being out there in the community, is critical. I think that we have to take an active role in legislative work. I think that when we have a civil rights bill that protects us, we can do other work much more easily and without fear. So for me, that's really high on my priority list.

"In the three days I've been here, I've probably had 20 calls from new women in town, or women who are just out, who need resources, who need to connect, who need a hotline number, who just want to come by and see what it's all about.

"So visibility is important; I think legislative work is important. I think that this organization exists and is accessible to all lesbians is important. In a city like Worcester, certainly there are support services, but there is no place folks can come anytime they want and meet other folks or sit around and read or talk. The fact that LCP exists is the most important piece of it all.

"What else can we do — I don't know yet. I don't know what the needs of women in Portland are and how we can meet those needs. I think some of the social events — the New Year's Eve dance, the formal this spring — are great stuff. I think many of us spent too many years being terribly serious about everything. We have to not forget to have fun, not forget to enjoy ourselves.

"I think work like the Groucho Marx poster [part of the Margins to the Mainstream Project], while I know there's some controversy around that, that's important work. I think we can do it better and bigger again.

"My first reaction [to the Groucho Marx ad] was that I thought it was astounding. That wouldn't have happened back home. I brought some back with me and folks couldn't believe that this organization and these women had the courage to do this. I do understand that some people have perceived it as middle-class, white-toast kind of stuff. But back home, one of the first comments I got was, 'Look at the diversity.'

"Maybe Portland is more out than Worcester is. Maybe people do perceive that project in a different light. But back home people were so excited and really applauded the project. I think we have to remember that this is the first effort of this kind. This campaign was palatable to middle-class America, and that may be a criticism. On the other hand, middle-class America may be able



PHOTO BY JAY BROWN

to say the L word for the first time. It was done with a very gentle kind of humor. And I think we need that.

"Fundraising is always, always a challenge. My fundraising experiences have been for the arts and for abused kids. It's not hard to raise money for the arts. When you deal with issues like incest, abuse and assault, it's a little more difficult. When you're raising money for the Lesbian Community Project, you're going to be pushing a lot of buttons. The challenge will be to identify funding sources and raise the money that will allow us to do the work we want to do.

"I do think that visibility in the community is going to be a real challenge. Enlarging and expanding what we can offer to people. For me, the challenge is to understand not only the project, but the community. To be out there, to meet people, to find out what people want.

"I've probably had 50 calls welcoming me to the community. I've been able to talk to folks and get a sense of their understanding of LCP. And then there are the nuts and bolts — the computer, the xerox machine. It's been a very full two-and-a-half days.

"I think it's going to be a learning process. It's exciting. It's certainly not boring. It's certainly not routine. I'm not just cloistered away at my desk five days a week. We've been going to Café Mocha, going to A Woman's Place Bookstore and just bopping around town in the evening, just trying to get a sense of the community.

"I'm a painter. For about 20 years I've done collage work — very large abstract work. In the last year, my partner and I have formed a company called Red Wing Creations. We do lesbian erotica on clothing, cards, books. It's wonderful. It allows both of us to work together on a project that we find very exciting.

"That's what we do to kind of de-accelerate and relax. We have two dogs who take up a lot of our time. And we are very outdoorsy kinds of folks. We can't wait to get out in the mountains. Here, the landscape is so dramatic. When we crossed from California to Oregon, I almost had a stroke. So we want to go to some old-growth forests, and to the ocean. I think that's what our weekends will be.

"I've been in New England almost 40 years. My son is there, but his band is going to do a cross-country tour, so I'll see him in the spring and perhaps the summer. There are people I'll miss terribly, but there are planes and trains and telephones. I think for the first time in our lives, my partner and I have decided to live exactly as we choose and that includes being here in Portland. That includes working in a position like this. That includes making some breaks. But I think they're healthy breaks."

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