

Freshman representative does well

All in all Gail Shibley's first session went well with help from her colleagues

by Inga Sorensen

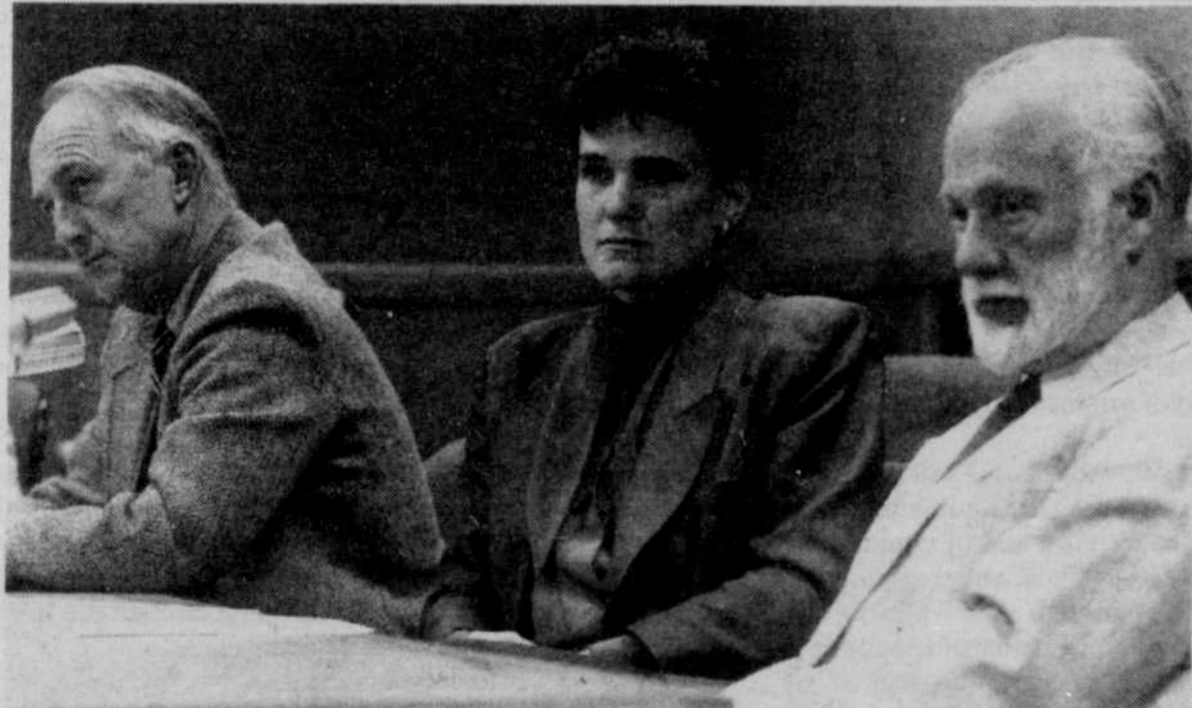
Imagine being a first-term legislator, a progressive Democrat in a conservatively-led chamber, and the state's first openly lesbian lawmaker. Though the combination could potentially spell disaster for any aspiring public servant, Gail Shibley says she's enjoyed the challenges she's faced while wearing these distinctive hats during her first term in the Oregon House of Representatives.

"I think I got a heck of a lot done considering I'm a young woman, a Democrat from Portland, and an out lesbian," maintains Shibley, the District 12 Democrat who was appointed to her seat in the Republican-controlled House back in January. With her appointment, Shibley became Oregon's first openly lesbian lawmaker, and she joins a mere handful of openly gay legislators nationwide. Reflecting upon her experiences during the recently-ended legislative session, Shibley speculates her party affiliation and politics had more to do with what she did or did not achieve. "I do think if I had been a lesbian from

we should encourage these alliances whenever possible...If my being a lesbian helped people in deciding whether they wanted to be nice to me, that's great. I don't know if that was the case, but I do know there were some wonderful women and men who were a big help to me."

Though Shibley has worked hard not to be perceived in a one dimensional fashion—that is, solely as a lesbian—she did experience uncomfortable situations distinctly because of her sexual orientation. "When I first got to Salem, I got a few sideways glances," she says. "People sometimes nodded or pointed in my direction. Even sitting and eating was an interesting experience. People would pretend they were eating and having another conversation, but their eyes and body language told a different story. They seemed to be realizing, 'My God, she walks and talks and eats. Maybe she's just like us in a lot of ways.'"

This revelation may have even had an effect on how her colleagues felt about gay and lesbian



Gail Shibley flanked by her colleagues.

Roseburg, who was a conservative Republican, my experience may have been different. But the fact is, I'm Gail Shibley. I happen to be a progressive Democrat who has certain beliefs that ran contrary to the beliefs of the House leadership. So it's difficult to assess why I didn't get all that I wanted, be it my personality, values, party affiliation, or the fact that I'm an out lesbian.

"Nevertheless, I'm pleased with what I was able to get done. I battled around 50 percent on my chief sponsor bills, and I got out substitute bills on guardianship, alternative fuels, real property, and an important first step was made in family medical leave for dependents. All in all, it wasn't bad. I'll take it."

Shibley has been praised by both her colleagues and political observers for her quick ability to learn the intricate workings of the Legislature. She is the first to admit, however, that guidance and support from such well-respected colleagues as former Speaker Vera Katz and Rep. Bev Stein, have helped make her journey through the legislature maze much easier.

"I think that those of us in the gay and lesbian community should remember that we are not alone," says Shibley. "Whether people are gay or straight, it's really their values and priorities that determine whether they're comrades. I think

civil rights. For the first time in its 18 year history, a gay rights measure made it through one house of the Legislature.

While there was no such luck in the House, it did gain the Senate's stamp of approval. "Maybe my presence did make a difference. I'm not sure," says Shibley. "But I do know that in the Senate our side picked up some votes that hadn't been ours in the past. I did have conversations with a couple of those individuals, though not specifically about Senate Bill 708. But maybe people realize that we're not much different than them. This knowledge, I believe, can make it harder to discriminate against others."

While the legislative session has just recently come to a close, Shibley isn't taking much time out to relax and savor the experience. She's already turned her sights to the 1992 elections. She and her supporters are already strategizing for her upcoming campaign. "I represent about 47,000 Oregonians," she says. "There are a lot of different people who depend on me to make decisions for them. I care about all of them, and I've worked as hard and as smart as I know how. I'm hoping now they'll be able to show me their support....The only thing I believe can defeat us is apathy."

Anyone interested in volunteering to help the Shibley campaign should contact 245-0447.

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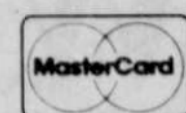
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