

# Prudence Miles

*An out lesbian on the Corvallis City Council*

by Marilyn Davis

**P**rudence Miles, one of only a few openly lesbian elected officials in Oregon, admits that being a city council member in Corvallis makes her "a kind of celebrity." Still, she refuses to take herself too seriously. "In the grand scheme of things," she says, "I'm pretty small potatoes."

That may be true, but in her own neighborhood, Miles is a well-known and influential figure. "People stop by. They come to the house. I see them when I'm walking the dog. People stop me and say, 'This car's been parked here for two weeks and it's got expired plates. Do something about it!' and I make a call to the police department."

But there's more to being a city council member these days than towing abandoned cars off the streets. The Oregon Citizens Alliance has filed a local initiative in Corvallis to prevent the council from passing any ordinance that would protect people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

"We've been working really hard to pass anti-discrimination and anti-harassment legislation that will help protect people against the kinds of attacks that people get here, which is mostly name-calling, and bottle throwing," says Miles. These things don't come under the state definition of intimidation or harassment, but they are nonetheless "not acceptable in our community," she continues. "Corvallis has a reputation for being very conservative, and yet people here definitely stand up for each other's rights."

Last July, not long after the OCA filed their statewide initiative, the Corvallis City Council passed a resolution opposing the initiative and encouraging citizens not to sign it. At the press conference called to announce the resolution, the City Council was joined by the mayor, some local law enforcement officials, and representatives of about twelve mainstream churches. Miles believes in this kind of coalition-building.

"There's an African-American man on the City Council and he and I are spearheading the campaign for an anti-hate and anti-discrimination ordinance," she says. "It's important that we form these alliances, especially in a town like Corvallis where all of us are isolated because the non-mainstream populations are so small."

Miles describes Corvallis as "cozy, a small town." Born and raised in Washington state, she moved to Corvallis five years ago. "I fell in love with it. I made friends, felt accepted, found a community, and decided to stay." She has always had an interest in politics, and running for city council seemed like a good place to start. "I wanted to get elected to something. I see a lot of people in decision-making roles, who are running the country, whose judgement I don't trust. I thought, ok, let's see if I can do a better job." During her campaign she tried to visit every house in her district, and "came pretty darned close" to succeeding. "I tried to get out and talk to everyone, and I think it made a difference." She ran against four men, and won with 40 percent of the vote.

Miles' sexual orientation wasn't an issue during her campaign. "It didn't seem like the kind of thing you'd put on your campaign literature." But now that the OCA has made homosexuality a political issue, she realizes that eventually she'll need to announce publicly that she is a lesbian.



PHOTO BY JACQUE JOHNSON

"The whole City Council and the city staff know I'm a lesbian, but probably a lot of the people I represent don't know." She's not sure what effect her announcement might have on the voters, but she says, "I'm hoping that if I do enough about abandoned cars and noisy neighbors and water bill problems, that is what people will remember."

"You always look at what the risks are; what you could lose. And I feel you lose a lot more by not being open. I'm sure there will be some people that automatically won't vote for me, but they might not have voted for me anyway. You just take your chances, and it won't be the end of the world if I don't get re-elected. I'll be able to handle it."

Miles was 13 when she worked on her first political campaign. It was 1968, and she rode her bike to the Eugene McCarthy headquarters in Seattle to address envelopes. Later, after serving two years in the Peace Corps in Ecuador, Miles worked two sessions as an administrative aid in the Washington legislature. Her current two year term on the Corvallis city council is a volunteer job, and trying to work full time while helping run the city is often stressful.

"I'm always rushing from committee meetings to work, and from work to committee meetings. There are some days I leave at 7:30 in the morning; I'm at work for eight hours, then I'm at Council for six or seven hours, and it gets very tiresome." Luckily, her partner, Nan Dudek, whom Miles describes as "one of the most outspoken lesbians in Corvallis," is supportive of her political work, and thinks that the City Council job is important. That makes it easier to work things out when conflicts arise at home. "Last year the garden went to hell," says Miles, "but maybe this year we'll get something done."

Miles believes her family's Quaker background makes a difference in the way they have been able to support her as a lesbian. "There's an acceptance of people and an open-mindedness. My grandmother, and my grandfather, who died a few years ago, have always been accepting people. They sit down with you and they want to know what's happening with you, right now."

This kind of support is crucial to Miles. "I love my family a lot. Having my family be supportive and understanding makes so many other things easier." She believes that family support is an especially difficult issue for lesbians and gay men. "If your family doesn't support you, you have to find another family, but if your family does support you, it gives you that solid base to go from. I think that's why our friends are so important to us, and our social groups, because we don't always have families to fall back on the way other people do."

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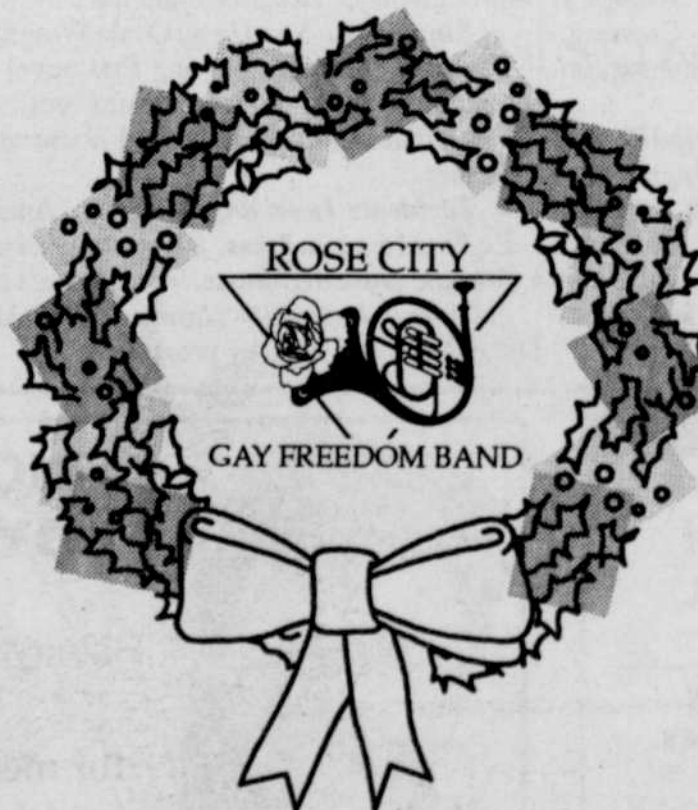
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