

local news

National award for local lesbian

The Advocate's Woman of the Year is Portland's own Donna Red Wing

by Marilyn Davis

Donna Red Wing, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, has recently been named Woman of the Year by *The Advocate* magazine. The award recognizes Red Wing for her compassionate, good-humored dedication to gay and lesbian political action and also celebrates the strength and spirit of Portland's lesbian and gay community.

Red Wing is pleased and excited by the award, which among other things means a trip to Los Angeles for a photo shoot. By the first of the year her face will be on newstands all over the country. And *The Advocate* has sent Helen Zia, the executive editor of *Ms.* magazine, to Portland to write the cover story. "Someone asked me, 'What are the perks of this award?'" laughs Red Wing. "I said 'I get to spend two days with Helen Zia.'"

The award is fun, but Red Wing quickly turns serious and modest when she talks about her work with the Lesbian Community Project. "I see the work I do as part of the work everybody does. It's not that special. I do work hard, extraordinarily hard. But if I were a waitress, which I was for many years, I'd work hard. If I were a farmer I'd work hard. I only do work now that makes sense to me, and that's a luxury in this world. I feel blessed. I get to do a job that makes a difference not only in my life but in the life of my entire community. That is a privilege, and I try to remember that when it's 11 o'clock at night and I'm still in the office filing papers."

Red Wing's political activities began in Worcester, Mass., when she was 14 years old. As she stood on the sidewalk watching a ban-the-bomb demonstration, a man she later knew as Abbie Hoffman grabbed her hand and pulled her into the street. Later she was active in Students for a Democratic Society, and in the late '60s she lived in Oregon as part of the Maggie's Farm collective.

Red Wing returned to Portland in 1989, when she moved here from Massachusetts with her partner, Sumitra Red Wing. ("She's still my



partner," says Donna, "and she always will be, I hope.") In Massachusetts, Donna was director of the largest child sexual abuse prevention project in the state, but the day came when she felt too tired to go to work anymore. "I reached the point where my understanding of man's capacity for evil just went beyond anything I could handle," she explains. So she decided to make a change.

Donna and Sumitra each wrote down their two favorite cities. They both chose Portland and Santa Fe. Then, since they both like water, they decided to come to Portland. To prepare for the move, they subscribed to *The Oregonian*. The first issue that arrived carried the Lesbian Community Project's ad for a director. Donna applied; two weeks later LCP flew her to Portland for an interview, and they offered her the job. "Coming to Portland was the easiest thing I've ever done."

Red Wing is thrilled about *The Advocate* award; she admits that it's fun to be "Woman of the Year," and she's determined to enjoy it. But she's quick to share her honor with the rest of Oregon's lesbian and gay community. "I think the award is about Oregon. It's about what all of us have done collectively. I'm only one of the folks who happen to be on the front lines. This sounds corny, and I hate to even say it, but the award really is about everyone who is fighting this battle against 9. That's the only way I can accept it."

Director Gus Van Sant honored by Oregon ACLU

Film director Gus Van Sant (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Drugstore Cowboy*) has received the second annual Freedom of Expression Award from the ACLU Foundation of Oregon at a reception Sept. 29 at the Portland Art Museum. Van Sant was honored as part of the ACLU's ongoing Uncensored Celebration, which has included displays on book censorship in many Oregon libraries.

Portland ACLU Associate Director Janet Arenz said that Van Sant was chosen because "Gus has chosen to deal with subjects that are sometimes difficult to deal with, and he has given up commercial goals in order to produce his work and maintain artistic integrity."

In presenting the award, City Commissioner Mike Lindberg said, "Freedom of speech is a powerful freedom, and the freedom to be a creator. Freedom of speech is empowering, which is why those in power often fear it."

Lindberg added that great artistic creativity is

"sometimes accomplished by breaking rules, challenging the powers that be and violating taboos." This is what Van Sant does in his art, Lindberg said.

Van Sant called the award "quite an honor." The shy and soft-spoken director said, "Until this year it didn't occur to me as much about how precious an artist's freedom of expression is.... this year—more than any other year—we've come up against political forces [the OCA] that challenge that freedom of expression."

"In trying to create my works," he said, "I've always just had a good time in doing whatever I wanted to do and never felt any pressure from the outside."

He closed by saying, "I'll continue making my films, and if there are any battles to be fought, we'll fight them together."

Van Sant has been directing *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* in Portland and is set to direct Warner Bros.' major film about the late Harvey Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, next year in San Francisco.

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