

# Thalia Zepatos

*A driving force behind the twelfth-hour success of the No on 9 campaign and a first-time author*

by Marilyn Davis

**T**halia Zepatos, travel writer and political organizer, reached the satisfying end of two difficult journeys in November. On Nov. 3, her work with the No on 9 campaign was rewarded when Oregon voters defeated Ballot Measure 9, and three weeks later her first book, *A Journey of One's Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler*, was published by Eighth Mountain Press. Now, a month after the election, she rests at home with a cup of tea, reflecting on the No on 9 campaign, eager to talk about her new book.

Zepatos, a self-described "straight person from a large Greek-American family," has spent her whole working life in politics, at first with consumer rights, then with state and national abortion-rights organizations. As an organizer for the National Abortion Rights Action League she traveled around the country teaching local women's groups how to set up pro-choice organizations and run election campaigns. She worked with the Rainbow Coalition and helped direct Barbara Roberts's successful campaign for governor.

For years Zepatos alternated periods of intense work on political campaigns with adventurous travel to all parts of the world. The idea of a book for "the independent woman traveler" began after one very long trip. "I came back and started doing workshops for woman travelers because I got so many phone calls from women who wanted to have a cup of coffee and talk. They had heard I had made this trip and they had long dreamed of doing something similar. Almost everyone has a dream or a fantasy of a journey, and women especially need a little more encouragement to make those dreams come true."

*A Journey of One's Own* combines realistic, practical advice with anecdotes from Zepatos's own travel journals and stories she has collected from other woman travelers. "I found from doing the workshops that it was the stories that capture women's imaginations. A woman reads 'The Ladies Compartment' and thinks, 'I could have been on that train in India. I could have taken care of myself. I could have told that guy where to go!'

In talking with women I found it wasn't that they really needed any more information. They needed someone to say, 'You can do it. You'll be OK. You can go.'"

At first Zepatos tried to balance working part-time for Governor Roberts with writing *A Journey of One's Own*, an effort she describes as a "terrible failure. The writing just never happened." Then a group of friends organized a fund-raiser and collected several thousand dollars to support her while she wrote full-time. She had signed a contract with her publisher and was writing to meet a deadline as the No on 9 campaign heated up last summer.

Zepatos had left political work to be a writer, but the commitment was hard to justify in the face of the OCA and Ballot Measure 9. She had spent six years in the pro-choice movement, fighting the OCA. "I saw how they started in just a couple of states, going for parental notification or limiting access to abortions for poor women. If it worked in one state they would go to others. They were testing in Oregon and Colorado the same way. I felt so strongly that we've got to stop them now or it would spread like a cancer across the whole country." Still she resisted the impulse to join the No on 9 campaign. "I had a pretty distant role compared to what my heart was saying. I was very torn. I went around and around and also saw the level of fear among some of my closest friends. The ante was going up and up and up."

Then the day after *A Journey of One's Own* went to press, Scot Nakagawa called from the No on 9 office to ask Zepatos to help set up the door-to-door canvassing and telephoning phase of the campaign, and she agreed. "I spent some sleepless nights and finally I couldn't live with myself anymore. I thought this is not just another campaign. It's not whether we have self-service gas or triple-trailers. These are our lives, and all of us are affected."

Eventually Zepatos and her publisher, Ruth Gundle, agreed to delay publication of the book until after the election, and Zepatos went to work for the campaign. "This was my book, and I'd been working on it forever. I thought, how can I put it off? But, on the other hand, how could I not?



It came down to being at a certain moment in history. Whether you like it or not, you're there, and you've got to give your all. So Ruth and I pushed back the publication date of the book. We thought it was that important."

In September, Zepatos went to work full time for No on 9, lending her years of political organizing experience to another fight against the OCA. She describes the campaign as "being in a row-boat with a tidal wave coming. The whole world came to look at Oregon and Measure 9. We had to ride, to surf the wave, and not get caught rolling under it. Once you get caught in the breakers, you can never get out."

"There's a huge job in a campaign of interfacing with the outside world, constructing a message and presenting it. There's another huge job of managing and training and supervising all the people who work on the staff and all the volunteers and activists all over the state. It's a virtually undoable task for one person. I was hired to help split that work and get it done more effectively. I felt that the skills and experience I had were very much needed there, and that's why I did it."

"And for me, as a straight person, it was an opportunity to feel what it meant to be part of a group of people that is reviled by society. I never once wore that 'Straight But Not Narrow' button, because I don't really like it personally, although I understood why some people wanted to wear it. What's the difference if I'm straight or not? Here I am on this side. I learned a lot. What frightened me more than anything else was the hatred and overt discrimination that was promulgated by Measure 9. It pulled the veneer from our state and allowed some ugly things to happen." Her worst moment, she says, came after St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Hillsboro had been defaced and a fire set. "I went in the church and saw painted in red blood, 'Kill Queers, Jews and Spics.' I broke down sobbing. This is what we've come to? It was horrible."

At the same time Zepatos knows the campaign also changed people's lives for the better. It generated fear, but it also inspired courage. She tells the story of a Catholic church where a member of the congregation came out during a discussion of Ballot Measure 9. "People broke down and cried. When they were talking about gay men and lesbians it was some other people, until one of their own stood up and said, 'This is me you're talking about.' Many acts of bravery like that happened during the campaign." She remembers the first big No on 9 rally in Pioneer Courthouse Square, when 10,000 people gathered to fight the OCA. "For people to feel that level of support was important. We were all in it together, and we've got to be."

Today, as she thinks about the campaign and looks forward to a West Coast tour to promote her book, Zepatos feels good about putting off publication of *A Journey of One's Own* so she could work against Ballot Measure 9. "Everything that every person did around the state was necessary for us to win. I feel that I made a difference. I don't know how much that difference was, but I'm very glad I was there."

*A Journey of One's Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler* is available at most local bookstores.

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