SPECIAL TRIBUTE

Champion of human rights

Keeston Lowery's death forces us to face the senseless toll of AIDS and remember the man who touched so many

by Renée LaChance

Lowery put a warm, kind, smiling face on what so many straight people feared: a gay man. As another senseless death at the hand of AIDS he put a warm, kind, smiling face on a disease that too many people would like to ignore.

Keeston touched many, many lives. His smile and a warm hug or handshake greeted everyone who crossed his path. His death Sunday, Aug. 29, stunned those who had been out of touch with Keeston, and surprised those who were close to him.

Keeston had been fighting AIDS-related ailments for the past two years. He never gave up his zest for life or his optimism in the face of dwindling health.

Keeston grew up in Jackson, Miss., where his political ideologies were formed by watching the civil rights movement in the South and the protests over the war in Vietnam. He cut his political teeth by working on Robert Kennedy's presiden-

tial campaign and by working against the 1977 Dade County, Fla., anti-gay referendum that brought Anita Bryant out of her house and into the streets.

When Keeston moved to Oregon in 1977 he didn't hesitate to involve himself in local lesbian and gay politics. He served on the Portland Town Council and helped found the Right to Privacy political action committee. Keeston educated and confronted countless candidates and incumbants in Oregon politics about basic equality for lesbians and gay men. His many contributions to Oregon's lesbian and gay community were honored

State Rep. Gail Shibley worked with Keeston for several years on the Right to Privacy's political affairs committee. "I am tremendously saddened by the loss of Keeston," said Shibley. "Losing Keeston is more than experiencing the death of one person, one friend, one ally. It is again confronting the enormous human toll of AIDS. In that respect, Keeston's death is senseless—enabled by ignorance, sanctioned by nonchalance and conspired by complacency at the highest levels of our government. I refuse to be complacent in the face of such unending horror.

"Carpe diem. Seize the day. That is how I will always picture Keeston in his fervor to promote equality. I will seize this day, and day after day refuse to compromise with inequality."

Keeston's death has touched many within politics. The majority of speakers at his memorial were politicians he had worked with: former Oregon governor Neil Goldschmidt, former U.S. representative Les AuCoin, Portland Mayor Vera

Katz and Portland City Commissioner Mike Lindberg. Lindberg, in addition to being Keeston's boss, was one of Keeston's closest friends.

"Keeston and I used to get together and listen to music," reminisced Lindberg at Keeston's memorial. "All kinds of music. Country, blues, rock and roll. I thought of two song titles that describe what I've been going through these last few days. The country song title would be, 'In Four Days I've Cried a 4x4 Truck Full of Tears' and the blues song title would be 'Just Cuz You See the Train Coming Doesn't Mean It Don't Hurt When It Hits You."

Keeston was instrumental in getting the Portland City Council to pass a civil rights ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, in 1991. Yet, Keeston wasn't a oneissue advocate. He fought to open doors for anyone without political power.

It was hard to know Keeston and not be involved in politics. One of his oldest and dearest friends shared a lot of his political work.

"I was blessed for having known Keeston for 12 years," said Teri Duffy, a longtime friend and former spokeswoman for Multnomah County. "There were times working at the county that I really appreciated having him as my buddy. Like when we were trying to get a diversity training program into place that included lesbians and gay men and when we were trying to get a domestic partnership ordinance within the county.

"He and Mike [Lindberg] included me to work on Portland's civil rights ordinance. Not only did we get to work on things together profes-

sionally but we did things personally, too. He was my soulmate. We shared travel and work and friends for the past 12 years.

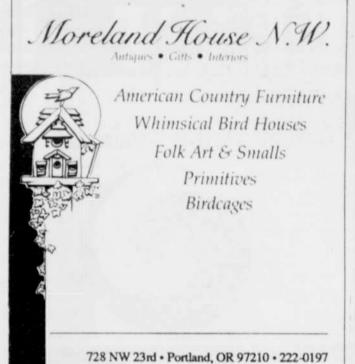
"One of the things Keeston and I talked about the day before he died was how he really wanted to see the city change its personnel policies on domestic partnerships. I believe that Keeston really wanted that done, and I hope that people will get together and finish that little piece of Keeston's work."

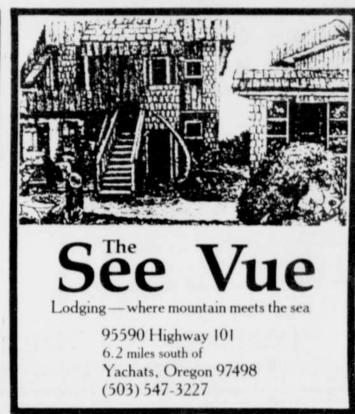
Politics dominated Keeston's life but gardening was his love. When Keeston had to leave his large home for a smaller one, friends helped him move over 200 plants. One woman who spoke at the open mike at Keeston's memorial talked about how Keeston helped her re-landscape her front yard. "He said to put in a lot of curves so that when you come around a corner there will be these beautiful surprises. That's how Keeston lived his life, always looking around the next corner for beautiful surprises."



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