

## ★ ★ ★ ELECTION SPECIAL ★ ★ ★



Gail Shibley



George Eighmey



Cynthia Wooten



Fred Neal

# OREGON'S POLITICAL COMING OUT

Two years ago, Oregon was known nationwide  
as the hotbed of homophobia.

Now, Oregon is forging ahead in queer politics with at least  
eight openly gay, lesbian or bisexual candidates up for  
election—a national record.

BY PAMELA LYONS

**I**t was one of the biggest coming out parties in Oregon history.

Rep. Kate Brown (D-Portland) knew she wanted to say something to the more than 300 people at the Right to Privacy's William Slope Dinner on April 23 in Eugene. As usual at an RTP event, elected officials who attended came up to the front of the room after dinner and took turns telling the audience their name and office. When Brown and Rep. Hedy Rijken (D-Newport) were the last of the more than 30 state legislators to reach the stage, "everybody knew what was coming," said Greg Jackson, executive director of RTP.

Brown began her speech. "I introduced myself, and then said, 'This is my coming out party,'" Brown said. "Then everyone cheered, and I said, 'Wait! You don't even know what I am yet!'"

Brown told the audience that she is bisexual—the first open bisexual to serve in the Oregon legislature. Rijken followed, telling the audience that she is a lesbian.

Brown and Rijken then joined Reps. Gail Shibley (D-Portland), George Eighmey (D-Portland) and Cynthia Wooten (D-Eugene) for a picture-taking session of the five openly queer state legislators. That's more than in any other state legislature in the country, according to William Wayborne, executive director of the Victory Fund, a national organization formed in 1991 that contributes money to openly queer candidates.

The number of gay, lesbian and bisexual candidates on the May primary ballot indicates the perseverance and growing acceptance of queer public officials. Shibley, Eighmey, Wooten and Brown are all seeking re-election this year. Chuck Carpenter, an openly gay man, is seeking the Republican nomination for House District 7, in Portland. Two Multnomah County judicial candidates, David Gernant and Janice R. Wilson, are openly queer. Fred Neal, who is open about his sexual orientation and his HIV-positive status, is seeking a spot on the Portland City Council.

Despite the efforts of the Oregon Citizens Alliance over the past four years, sexual minorities have forged a position in the Oregon political arena, in ways unmatched in most other states. "I'm not sure what Oregon has done, but I wish we could bottle it and send it to other states," Wayborne said.

**A**lthough the OCA acts as a model for groups in other parts of the country who want to "stop the homosexual agenda," clearly, the political climate in Oregon concerning equal rights and op-

portunities for sexual minorities is unique. In 1992, 44 percent of voters approved Measure 9, which would have labeled gay men, lesbians and bisexuals as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse." Since then, 20 cities and counties have passed measures that block equal rights protections for sexual minorities. The battle has entered the courts, where the OCA has suffered two setbacks this year.

Some say that the threat from the OCA has helped push sexual minorities into the political arena. "Thank goodness that something came along to get us motivated," Eighmey said. "People are finally waking up and coming out in ways they never were before."

Before the threat of the OCA, Eighmey, an attorney, said he was not secretive about his sexual orientation; he didn't make a point of

telling people, either. Now, he is completely open about his relationship. "The focus on oppression is what is making people come out," he said. "We are a lot stronger in numbers than ever before."

Eighmey was appointed to office in 1992, to fill Beverly Stein's seat when she left to become chairwoman of the Multnomah County Commission.

Brown believes the growing political movement is due in part to the overall climate created by the OCA. "Crisis builds leadership and community," she said.

Greg Jackson, who heads the Right to Privacy, said that the OCA's campaign has backfired and helped fuel support for civil rights. "We say thank you to the OCA.... Their vindictive campaigning has brought people out." RTP contributes money to candidates who support civil rights for sexual

minorities.

Other politicians are not so gracious toward the OCA. "I don't go out of my way to thank them," Shibley said. "The fact is that this lemon is here and [has] been here, and we queers have made lemonade out of it."

"We have risen to the occasion of fighting the OCA, but I wish we didn't have to," Wooten said.

Jerry Keene, a openly gay Republican who was considering a campaign in Portland's District 11, said that the gay, lesbian and bisexual community is going through a period of "political coming out." "A lot of the catalyst was the OCA but, beyond that, we were ready. The Victory Fund has made us ready," he said.

The Victory Fund had contributed money to Keene's campaign for the House. There have been reports that Keene has since changed his mind about running, but this was still unconfirmed at press time.

Julie Davis, executive director of Support Our Communities PAC, a group that directly counters the OCA, said that electing openly queer leaders is the next step in the movement for civil rights. "It's one of the tools we have to dispel the myths that the OCA has put out about gays and lesbians," she said. "We are more visible, more out than we have ever been in the state before 1992."

**G**ail Shibley cleared the path for openly queer politicians in 1991, when she was appointed to the House. She won re-election in 1992 and is considered a contender for speaker if the Democrats regain control of the House.

"When Gail blew the door off of the hinges and came out as a public official, she blazed the candidate trail," Wayborne said. "Now, it seems to be the 'in' thing in the Oregon House."

So far, the Victory Fund has raised about \$200,000 that will be distributed to 17 candidates nationwide, including Eighmey and Shibley.

Shibley attributes the growing number of open sexual minorities in Oregon politics to several factors. In the face of the OCA offensive, she said, many people are coming out in their jobs, and that bridges over into politics. The impact of HIV and AIDS has also prompted people to be up front and honest about who they are. "Emotionally and psychologically, it's time to live out loud," Shibley said.

Others credit Shibley for setting an example in the legislature that may have made it safer to come out. "Gail Shibley really started the spiral," Davis

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