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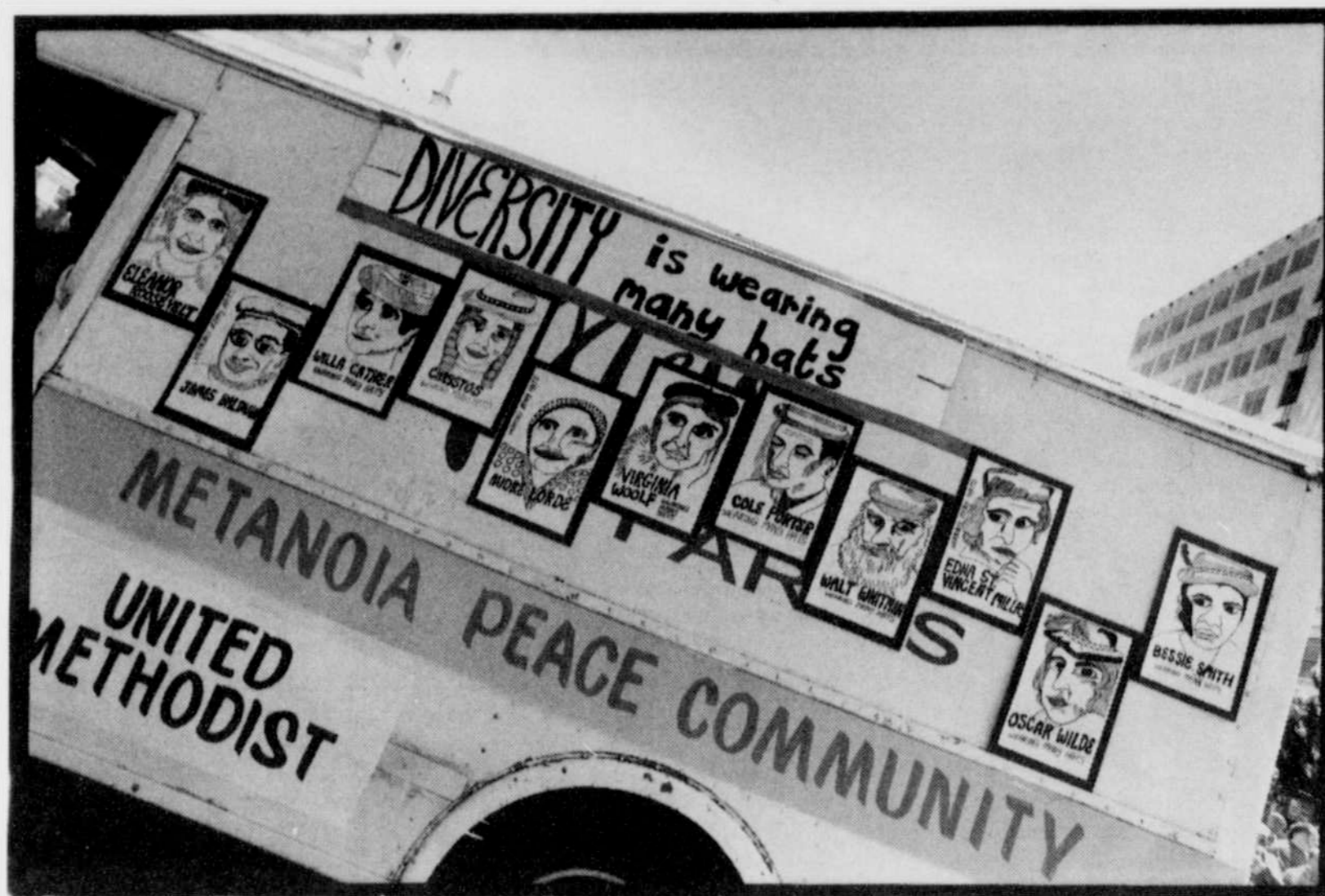


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

editorial

Now he's gone too far

Clinton axes Joycelyn Elders for a frank answer to a frank question

by Renée LaChance

Bill Clinton was my choice for president. I expected him to walk his talk. I expected him to live up to his promises. I expected him to do far more than he has done.

Fresh out of the gate, he broke his promise to end the ban on lesbians and gay men in the military. I wrote that off as Clinton needing to reach a compromise and figured there must be more going on behind the scenes than anyone was telling us.

Then he appointed Joycelyn Elders his surgeon general. Appointing someone like Elders to formulate the public health policies for the United States was the kind of thing I hoped for from Clinton. Here was a woman who would voice the concerns of millions of underrepresented individuals regarding public health.

She immediately spoke out against attitudes that promoted disease rather than good health: racism, sexism, homophobia, ignorance. She spoke her mind and she spoke it explicitly, making her a target of Republicans and right-wing Christian leaders, and a renegade in the Clinton administration.

After a speech at a World AIDS Day event at the United Nations, Elders was asked whether more candid discussion and promotion of masturbation would be helpful in the campaign against HIV and AIDS. Her response was the straw that broke Clinton's back, and, on Dec. 9, he asked for her resignation. I expected more from Clinton. I expected him to respect and honor the actions of people he appointed to key positions. After

all, he had worked with Elders when he was governor of Arkansas and she was the director of the Arkansas Department of Health—he knew what she stood for.

So what was the damning answer to the question?

In keeping with her shoot-from-the-lip style, Elders responded: "I'm a very strong advocate of a comprehensive health education program.... I feel it should be age appropriate, it should be complete, and we need to teach our children the things that they need to know. And we know that many of our parents have difficulty teaching certain things. And for that reason, to make sure our children are informed, I've always felt that we should make it a part of our schools. I feel it's the only institution we have where all the children go. And at present in our schools, it's very incomplete, and only 5 percent of schools have a comprehensive program.

"As per your specific question, in regard to masturbation, I think it is something that is part of human sexuality and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught. But we've not even taught our children the very basics. And I feel that we have tried ignorance for a very long time, and it's time to try education."

That these words should be the ones to end Elders' tenure as surgeon general makes me furious. Furious at a society that is so sex-phobic that it won't tolerate frank responses to frank questions. Furious that that phobia has perpetuated the AIDS pandemic. Furious that I don't know what to do with that fury because it so quickly turns to grief.

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