

local news

Gay men and lesbians are often accused of seeking "special rights" and attempting to "promote" their "lifestyles." Just a week into Oregon's 1995 legislative session, however, a self-described family-values Democrat has introduced a bill mandating that government view "legal marriage between man and woman [as a] special relationship that should be favored and supported by the state [and its] political subdivisions." Political observers say this marks the first in what could become a series of legislative assaults on the sexual minority community.

"Be very, very alert," warns state Rep. Gail Shibley (D-Portland), who four years ago made history by becoming Oregon's first openly gay or lesbian legislator. "That's my best advice to the gay community. We've got more OCA-backed legislators in office. The Republicans control the entire Legislature. There are lots of reasons to be wary."

During the November elections, Republicans gained a majority in both chambers of the statehouse for the first time in 40 years. (The Senate had previously been controlled by Democrats.) The GOP sweep included the election of a handful of Oregon Citizens Alliance-backed candidates, and civil rights advocates were quick to bemoan the Republican takeover.

Ironically, however, it is a Democrat, albeit a conservative one, who has launched the opening legislative salvo against sexual minority and other "nontraditional" relationships. State Rep. Kevin Mannix (D-Salem) is the sponsor of House Bill 2317, which calls upon the state to "favor" heterosexual marriages; additionally, it would prohibit local governments from adopting measures that are "inconsistent" with that policy and "requires provision in public contracts that contractors may not adopt or enforce policy that is inconsistent with state policy." If approved, state and local governments, for instance, would not be allowed to contract with businesses that have adopted domestic partnership agreements.

"The representative had heard that some of the state campuses were allowing nonmarried [including gay and lesbian] couples into shared housing units that were for married couples," says Mannix's legislative aide Maureen Kuhlman. "He became very concerned about this because it smacks up against his morals."

"It's not a surprise that Mannix would come forward with something like this," says Kate Brown, an openly bisexual House Democrat from Portland. "The thing is, if this were introduced during past sessions, I would say it wouldn't have a chance at passing. This time I can't say that so confidently."

Mannix has also introduced a bill prohibiting unmarried women from receiving alternative insemination, a conception method often used by lesbians.

Oregon has a national reputation for its cultural and political factionalism. It has the OCA, but, at the same time, its citizens have elected more openly gay, lesbian and bisexual state lawmakers than any other state. (Five are currently serving—four Democrats and one Republican—all in the House.) This schism will be apparent this session as well. There will be the Mannix-minded lawmakers who will push inherently anti-gay/lesbian-rights legislation. Then there will be legislators like Gail Shibley, Kate Brown, and openly gay state Reps. George

Oregon's 1995 legislative session

*It's a long and winding road—
but what surprises lay around the bend?*

by Inga Sorensen



George Eighmey

Eighmey (D-Portland) and Cynthia Wooten (D-Eugene), who will work on behalf of civil rights legislation based on sexual orientation. In fact, a few days after Mannix introduced HB 2317, Right To Privacy, the state's largest lesbian, gay and bisexual rights political action committee, hosted its first-ever reception for lawmakers in Salem. Right To Privacy is also promoting legislation which would bar discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment and public accommodations.

"We are waiting to introduce the omnibus bill," explains Right To Privacy Executive Director Greg Jackson, who says the group had initially planned to unveil the measure the day of the reception. "We've decided to hold back for a while. We don't want it out there too early because of the contro-

versy it could spark, you know, like the gays in the military fiasco." Versions of a lesbian and gay civil rights bill have been introduced each session for the past two decades, to no avail.

"Last session there was real hope that we could pass a nondiscrimination act dealing with sexual orientation," says Eighmey, who was appointed to his seat late in the last session. He was elected to the Legislature this past November. "Now we'll be lucky if we even get a hearing." Nonetheless, Eighmey and others feel it's the proper strategy to push for an omnibus gay/lesbian rights bill. "You must ask for everything and work your way down from there," he says. "And you can't let your critics define your agenda for you."

In addition to the omnibus bill, Eighmey says various members of the (unofficial) sexual minor-

ity legislative caucus are crafting domestic partnership legislation, as well as a bill barring discrimination based on sexual orientation strictly in employment. Eighmey is also sponsoring a measure that would allow people to decide how their remains are disposed of. Currently, says Eighmey, a person's next of kin makes that decision. Since gay and lesbian marriages are not legal, partners are often left out of that decision-making process.

Many are wondering what Chuck Carpenter, a first-term House Republican from Portland, will do this session. More specifically, they wonder whether Carpenter, who came out publicly during his campaign, will co-sponsor the omnibus lesbian and gay rights bill. The 32-year-old Nike employee, who does not have a history of actively working on behalf of gay and lesbian rights causes, received a dual endorsement from Right To Privacy, which is encouraging him to sign onto the bill.

"I'm trying to get a feel for this place, to get a sense of how I can be most effective," Carpenter says, adding his experience thus far with his GOP colleagues has been mostly positive. He recounts one situation, however, when the Republican caucus met prior to Gov. John Kitzhaber's inauguration. During that meeting, Speaker Bev Clarno (R-Bend) was reading aloud the agenda for the opening ceremonies. On that list was the quartet from the Portland Gay Men's Choir, whom Kitzhaber had asked to perform. When Clarno mentioned the choir, some GOP members began snickering and making loud derogatory remarks. According to Eighmey (who was not in attendance but heard the story from various sources), Clarno "marched down to those members and told them those types of comments would not be tolerated."

Carpenter adds: "The day I was sworn in several Republican colleagues came up to me to say that they felt terrible about what had happened and that they were sorry for the way [those members] had acted. The lawmakers who made the remarks didn't apologize, but it was nice that many of their colleagues did.... You have to have a thick skin. You take the hits and turn them around."

Carpenter was assigned to highly sought-after posts on the House Judiciary Committee, as well as the Labor and Commerce committees. Kate Brown also grabbed a posh committee assignment when House leaders named the 34-year-old Democrat vice chair of the Judiciary Committee.

The fear remains that conservative lawmakers (such as Democrat Mannix) will continue to promote anti-gay/lesbian legislation. Several legislative sources report that Eileen Qutub (R-Beaverton), a first-term House member who was endorsed by the OCA, has discussed crafting legislation designed to remove sexual orientation from the state's existing hate crimes statute—the same law that was recently used to convict a Portland firefighter of intimidating former state lawmaker Hedy Rijken and her female partner, Danetta Wilke, because he perceived the women to be lesbians.

A few weeks ago, Qutub told *Just Out*: "Those rumors are not true. I haven't even read the [intimidation] statute, so I don't even know if I support it or not.... I also want to add that any hate crime should not be condoned."

Shibley, whose office is between Qutub's and OCA-backed candidate Charles Starr's says: "I see those two running back and forth to each other's offices. Who can say what they are up to?"



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