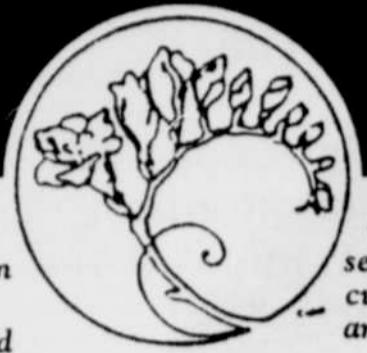


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local news

The virtue of inclusivity

Oregon's new governor stresses cooperation and commonality in his inaugural speech and mentions "sexual orientation"

by Inga Sorensen

The eye-opening campaigns over statewide discriminatory measures such as 1992's Ballot Measure 9 and 1994's Ballot Measure 13 assuredly influenced the tone and content of Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's inaugural speech—that according to longtime political observer and commentator William Lunch, a professor of political science at Oregon State University in Corvallis. Kitzhaber included sexual minorities in his inaugural speech last month.

"The Republican Party nationally, and politics in general, is becoming notably more hostile towards minorities," says Lunch. "At a time when the rest of the nation was electing Republican governors and swinging toward the right, Oregonians were electing a Democrat."

That's not the only significant difference: According to Lunch, Kitzhaber's speech was unlike other elected officials' by virtue of its inclusivity. In that address, Kitzhaber discussed the many challenges facing the state's citizenry, including issues involving school funding, the economy and crime.

"These issues affect all Oregonians, regardless of political party, regardless of ethnic background or religion or sexual orientation. They affect all of us, wherever we live or work or go to school, and they cannot be solved without cooperation," Kitzhaber said. "That means we must stop ceding power to groups and individuals that draw their lifeblood and their livelihood from turning Oregonians against each other. Our success depends on our willingness to respect our differences."

Says Lunch, "One of the ironies of Measure 9 and Measure 13 is that while the intent was to deny a group of citizens their rights, [the measures] forced people to become politically active and to come out. This in turn has forced politi-

cians in Oregon to stand up and take notice.... The gay community is perceived to have political and financial clout."

Lunch says Kitzhaber's presentation was likely influenced by the combination of this heightened public awareness about lesbian and gay rights and the fact that "Oregon remains one of the more liberal states in the union."

"The Northwest has the lowest level of church attendance in the country. That is not unrelated to the higher level of tolerance typically found here," says Lunch. "If John Kitzhaber had just been elected the governor of Kansas, I don't think he would be including 'sexual orientation' in his inaugural speech."

Greg Jackson, executive director of Right To Privacy, a statewide gay and lesbian rights lobbying group, says Kitzhaber's pro-tolerance rhetoric is not unusual.

"All through the campaign Kitzhaber was an ardent and vocal supporter of diversity and gay and lesbian rights. He attended community fundraisers, and he often spoke out against the Oregon Citizens Alliance's anti-gay efforts," says Jackson.

Transforming that pro-tolerance rhetoric into pro-lesbian and -gay rights legislation will be a lot tougher. That's primarily because for the first time in 40 years the state Legislature is controlled by Republicans, who have traditionally been less supportive of sexual minority rights.

"I know Kitzhaber has said [civil rights for sexual minorities] is a top priority for him. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Legislature," says Jackson. Regardless, Right To Privacy is pushing a state anti-discrimination measure based on sexual orientation.

Lunch adds: "Expect our politicians to focus on budgetary matters, crime and school funding and not much else this session."

Phoenix Rising wants to make the good even better

Jim Everett is a man who doesn't appear to mind change. That's a good thing, considering he has experienced so much of it of late.

Everett is the recently hired clinical services director for Phoenix Rising Foundation, a Portland-based counseling center that has served the sexual minorities community for nearly 20 years. A few months ago, the 48-year-old packed his bags and moved from the warm, dry Lone Star State to Portland, a considerably moister place. In Texas, Everett had been director of the HIV/AIDS program at the Montrose Counseling Center in Houston.

"I would like to see us [Phoenix Rising] connect with communities that we haven't traditionally reached out to," says Everett, who will supervise the center's clinical staff and help oversee day-to-day operations. "Our clients deal with a wide variety of concerns. Of course there are the traditional problems like coming out, but there are other issues that we should address as well."

Phoenix Rising currently offers a host of services including counseling for individuals, couples and families; support training and therapy groups; referrals; anti-homophobia training;

youth support groups; and a youth speakers' bureau.

Everett says he's hoping to expand services to address the growing awareness surrounding lesbian health concerns; problems encountered by people who are openly gay, lesbian or bisexual at work; and the needs of bisexuals and pre- and post-operative transsexuals. He'd also like to bring the agency into the managed care system by getting health organizations to place Phoenix Rising on their referral lists.

"I've heard horror stories from gay clients who have gone to straight counselors who tell them things like 'You're only going through a phase.' This happens even in cases where gay clients are totally comfortable with their sexual orientation. They come to discuss other issues, yet their counselors feel a need to keep coming back to the client's sexual orientation."

He adds, "The beauty of a counseling center like Phoenix Rising is that it is specifically geared toward the sexual minority community, whose members often feel more comfortable in this type of a setting."

Everett, who received his academic training at the University of Arkansas, lives with his partner, Randy Cumpian, an artist. The two share a home in Southwest Portland.

Inga Sorensen