

A Seattle legend

Washington state Sen. Cal Anderson
is fiercely determined as he comes out as having AIDS

by Inga Sorensen

Cal Anderson is being fed a healthy diet of love and support. And blackberry pie.

Anderson, a Washington state senator, recently publicly announced he has AIDS. The 46-year-old Democrat—who is the Legislature's only openly gay member—says he has received a tremendous outpouring of support since his disclosure.

"My office looks like a flower shop, which is a good thing because I love flowers," says the lifelong Washingtonian, who served in the House before winning his bid for a Senate seat last November. "And the House chef sent me some blackberry pie. He knows it's my favorite."

Anderson, who represents the Seattle area, was recently diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma as a complication of AIDS. He says he has known for a decade that he is HIV positive, but decided to come forward now "because of the serious nature of this recent diagnosis."

"I held back for a while because I didn't want people to say, 'See, another gay man with AIDS,' " explains Anderson. "It almost feels like I've undergone a second coming out. A huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

He adds, "I will have good days and bad days, just like everyone else. At this point, I am optimistic about my prognosis and see no reason to let this situation change the commitment I've made to the people of the 43rd District."

Anderson was first appointed to the state House in 1987 and went on to win three House terms before moving over to the Senate. He has long been an outspoken supporter of gay and lesbian civil rights; as a representative he successfully sponsored legislation barring discrimination against gay men and lesbians in housing, employment and medical care. (The legislation never made it through the Senate, however.)

This session he has introduced a bill in the Democrat-controlled Senate which would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment and credit. State Rep. Frank Chopp (D-Seattle), introduced companion legislation in the Republican-dominated House.

"Cal is a legend in Seattle and he is an outstanding legislator," says Chopp, who has worked closely with Anderson on gay and lesbian rights legislation. "People really love and respect him."

Chopp cites a recent survey which asked legislative colleagues and lobbyists to name whom they believed was the most effective state lawmaker. Anderson ranked third among nearly 150 legislators. "There was a real sense of sadness when Cal made his announcement, but, in typical fashion, he's handled himself with great dignity and strength," he says.

Ed Murray is the immediate past president of the Privacy Fund, which lobbies Washington state lawmakers on sexual minority and HIV-related issues. "I talk to Cal almost every day. He

is one of my closest friends," says Murray, who has known of Anderson's health status for several years. "People are very upset about the situation, but Cal is proving that people can live with AIDS."

After learning of the news, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), took to the nation's Senate floor to publicly acknowledge Anderson's contributions: "Cal is a Vietnam veteran. He earned two Bronze Stars and four Army Commendation medals for meritorious service in that conflict. He is courageous...he is honest. He has touched so many lives across this country—his very presence in our state Legislature shows young people that no matter who they are or where they come from, everybody has a great deal to offer their communities and our country. His very presence tells us that America will be great when we let everybody participate and be an equal voice in our national dialogue."

Anderson has fought other battles as well. Though he maintained a relatively low profile during his first few years in office, the lawmaker took on Oregon Citizens Alliance leader Lon Mabon when the anti-gay and -lesbian crusader unveiled his plans two years ago to launch a similar group in Washington.

"For the first few days after Cal publicly said he had AIDS, I saw people walking around looking pretty shell-shocked," says Ted Lord, executive director of the Seattle-based Pride Foundation, which provides funding to gay-positive organizations and projects.

Lord says, "That type of announcement just brings it all home again—about all the losses our community has suffered. But Cal is strong and fiercely determined."

Fiercely determined and a legislator to the bone. "Maybe my announcement will help move the gay rights bill along because it casts a little more attention on the issue," says Anderson. "I think it could have a positive effect."

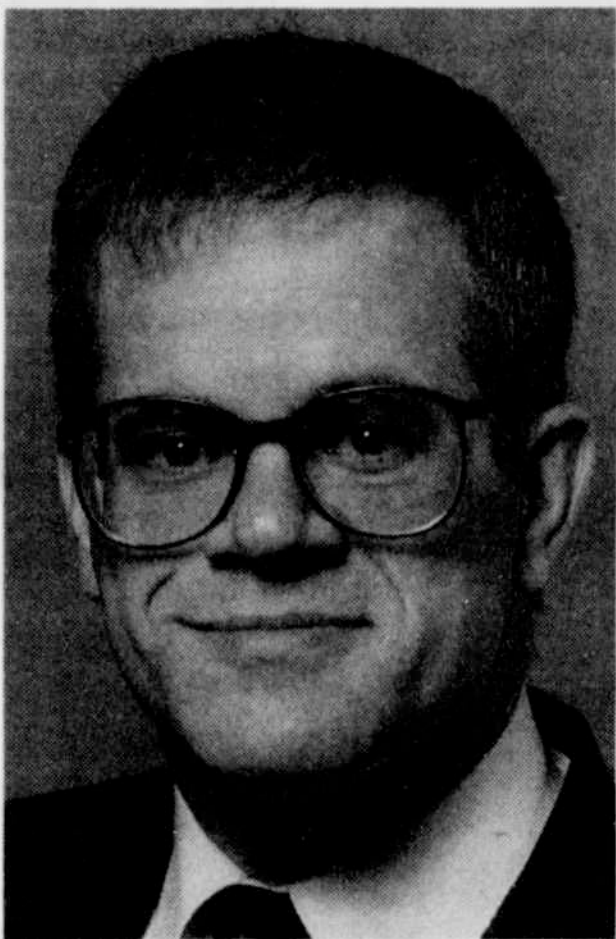
Says Chopp: "At the beginning of the session, the Republican leadership said that gay-related issues would not be on the agenda. They tried to ignore the need for a civil rights bill. Cal's announcement and his tenacity have stopped that from totally happening."

On the personal side, Anderson just celebrated his 10-year anniversary with his partner, Eric Ishino, who works with the City of Seattle's legislative department.

"He's holding up well," says Anderson. "Of course he's known about my health status for years, but I think when one goes public about something like this it makes it seem more real. But he's strong."

The couple enjoy sea kayaking and spending time with close friends.

"My future plans? To take care of myself and continue working for the people of my district," says Anderson. "And to eat plenty of food and keep my weight up. In fact, I had two pieces of apple pie yesterday. That's the way to do it."



Cal Anderson

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