

# School district bars recruiters

*Portland becomes the second city in the country to reject military recruiters on grounds of discrimination*

by Inga Sorensen

**M**arc Abrams, a Portland civil liberties attorney and member of the Portland School District Board of Education, makes no bones about the fact that he wants to send a message to the U.S. government.

"Discrimination is wrong. Plain and simple. Through our actions we have made an important statement that the Portland Public Schools have a higher standard when it comes to standing up for equal rights and protections for all citizens, regardless of their sexual orientation."

With barely a moment to get his feet wet (he began his first school board term on July 1), Abrams took on a potentially explosive issue: removing military recruiters from school grounds due to the federal government's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which discriminates against openly gay, lesbian and bisexual servicemembers.

"I'm exhausted and exhilarated," Abrams told *Just Out* the morning after the board voted to bar recruiters from all Portland Public Schools. An estimated 150 people—most of whom backed Abram's effort—turned out for the Aug. 31 meeting in which the school board passed two nondiscrimination measures.

One resolution, which was adopted by a 6-1 vote, says any employer that discriminates on the basis of ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and other factors should be prohibited

from recruiting in Portland schools. The second resolution, which passed 5-2, proclaims the military to be one such employer and bans it from schools.

Board member Marty Howard voted against both resolutions; Lucious Hicks joined Howard in voting against the proposal specifically naming the military as an employer that discriminates.

"I don't agree with the ban on gays and lesbians, but I think the military should have access to students," says Howard, who is serving his second term on the school board. "I wish the meeting had been used to weigh the evidence instead of pandering so obviously to a special interest group. I don't mean gays and lesbians, but rather all of the anti-military people who showed up."

Many of those who spoke against military recruiting in schools were members of peace and justice groups, human rights and veterans' organizations, as well as gay and lesbian rights supporters. Some opponents claimed that recruiters harass students, while others voiced specific opposition to the federal government's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

"You hear the argument that by removing the military from schools we're limiting important career opportunities for young people, particularly those who are at risk," says Abrams. "Well I say to them, 'What about gay and lesbian young people. Are they not also at risk?'"

Serving her third term on the board, Carol Turner is the Portland Board of Education's senior member. "During the meeting I said very clearly that the real issue was not about being pro- or anti-military, but rather discrimination. There were many people who showed up who were obviously anti-military, but I was more concerned with the

fact that the military is an employer who discriminates," she says.

Turner adds: "I came into this debate neutrally. I wasn't sure how I was going to vote until I did some research and learned that people were being kicked out of the military—regardless of their job performance—simply because of their sexual orientation. That's wrong. While this may temporarily disadvantage some kids, I think there was a higher principle that needed to be addressed."

"I feel really good about this," says Joseph Tam, who, like Abrams, is new to the school board. "I don't view our actions as risky because I know we have support from many different communities."

Tam, who is an investigator with the civil rights division of the state Bureau of Labor and Industries, adds: "I hope other school boards follow suit, and I hope the Department of Defense hears what we're saying."

The Portland school board isn't the first to bar military recruiters. In 1991, a Rochester, N.Y., school district adopted a policy that did just that. In May 1994, the New York Court of Appeals upheld the policy, ruling that the school board could prohibit any employers who discriminate based on sexual orientation. Efforts have also been made—though with little success—to remove military recruiters from college campuses across the country.

Portland resident Barb Eichberger, 33, served in the U.S. military for seven years before being honorably discharged in 1986 for being a lesbian. Today she is involved with Veterans for Human Rights, an Oregon war veterans' organization that provides service and support to veterans—particularly to gay and lesbian veterans and servicemembers.

"The energy in the room [during the board vote] was incredible," she says. "I am just amazed at the amount of support we had from human rights groups and other veterans' organizations. It was incredible. I think the next thing we need to do is show the school board how we feel about its action. They need to be thanked."

Michelle Benecke is the co-director of the Washington, D.C.-based Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. The group, which was formed in October 1993, provides legal assistance to those adversely affected by the military ban. Benecke claims it is the only national organization specifically dedicated to this issue.

"The military's policy is premised on the ridiculous notion that all straight people are terrified of gays and lesbians and won't be able to function effectively with someone if they're openly gay," says the former Army captain. "This type of action proves that all straight people don't hate gays and lesbians and many think that it's wrong to discriminate."

Benecke says she knows of no other school district, outside of Rochester and now Portland, that has barred military recruiters. "I think it's very important that the school board has gone on record formally opposing the military ban. That's not easy to do given that it is a sensitive issue, particularly when you're dealing with schools. I'm thrilled and proud of Portland for doing this."

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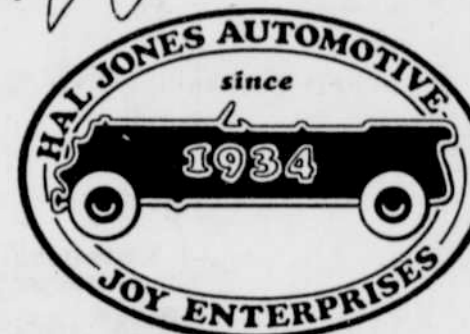


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