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## local news

# A Red Wing and a prayer

Facing surgery to remove a brain tumor can't keep this activist down

by Inga Sorensen

Even during times of personal crisis, Donna Red Wing is thinking of the bigger picture. "Keep fighting the good fight—we are all soldiers in this cultural war. 1996 will be a tough year. Get ready. Get physically, emotionally and politically fit. Each one of us has the opportunity to make a difference." That's pretty sober and straightforward advice, but when you realize that Red Wing—who is one of this country's leading queer activists—penned this only days after learning she had a brain tumor, it borders on amazing.

Not only that, Red Wing provided such counsel in a self-published newsletter, dubbed the *Neuro-News*, which she crafted and sent to friends and associates detailing—with a healthy dose of humor—how she came to learn of the tumor and what life has been like for her since she received that news.

(Surgery to remove the tumor was scheduled as *Just Out* was going to press. By the time you read this, Red Wing should be on the road to healing. We send her our warmest and best wishes for a speedy recovery.)

Red Wing, who is the former executive director of the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project and current western field director for the national Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, collapsed in Indianapolis on Oct. 1 due to a grand mal seizure.

Red Wing, who lives in Northeast Portland but travels extensively for her job, had been participating in a Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays conference. She was rushed by ambulance to the Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis where she was diagnosed with a tumor in her frontal lobe.

Red Wing's life partner, Sumitra, immediately flew out from Portland to be by Donna's side, and the duo returned to the Rose City a few days later.

"The doctors say they are 98 percent sure the tumor is benign, but they need to perform surgery to remove it," says A.C. Miller, a neighbor and close friend of the Red Wings. "Donna is a very strong person, but this has been very frightening for everyone involved."

According to Miller, Red Wing receives health coverage through GLAAD, but the insurance company that was involved had been "uncooperative with regard to approving the neurosurgeon that Donna was referred to by the physicians and surgeons in Indiana, resulting in noncoverage for a portion of her medical expenses."

According to the *Neuro-News*, the situation was finally resolved only after "10 days of grueling phone work and one full day of calls from the governor's office, the Rainbow Coalition, human rights groups, clinics, other HMOs, a gaggle of doctors, nurses and administrators, friends, activists, politicians and esteemed members of the bar." The surgery, set for the first of November, will be at Oregon Health Sciences University Hospital.

The Red Wings have made Portland their home since they moved here from Massachusetts

in the late 1980s. As Lesbian Community Project executive director, Donna Red Wing was instrumental in the development of a sexual minority hate crimes reporting line and in creating a friendly working relationship between the community and the Portland Police Bureau. She organized tirelessly against the Oregon Citizens Alliance's anti-gay initiatives (and continues to do so).

In 1992 she was recognized nationally for her civil rights work when *The Advocate* named Red Wing its "Woman of the Year."

Though Donna is widely viewed as the activist

in the family, it was actually Sumitra who "dragged me into the lesbian and gay rights movement," Donna Red Wing told *The Advocate*.

That was around 1986 when Sumitra—a lesbian feminist and radio talk show host whose last name was then Pomerleau—and Donna—a child advocate whose last name was Russell (she had previously been married and birthed a son, Julian, in 1970)—met, fell in love, adopted the last name Red Wing and trekked to

Portland to enjoy what they thought was going to be a slower-paced life.

Since then, the Red Wings have become perhaps the region's best known lesbian couple.

"Don't forget the animals," warns Miller. "Their dogs—Kenya and Ajax—have been faithfully by Donna's side—especially Kenya [a golden retriever]. They are part of their family, too." And the two cats.

While awaiting surgery Red Wing has been resting at home, where she conducts GLAAD work via computer and telephone. "But she tires easily," says Miller. "Donna has been on medication to decrease the chance of another seizure."

On a positive note, Miller says financial and emotional support has been pouring in from across the country. "Donna has many friends in many places," she says.

Indeed. According to the *Neuro-News*, a group of Buddhist monks in Cambodia began a worldwide prayer circle for Red Wing, and a cadre of women in British Columbia started a healing circle. In the lesbian hot spot of Northampton, Mass., "friends made an altar, complete with crispy New England leaves." Julian Russell, now a twentysomething classical guitarist, is flying out from the East Coast to spend the next month caring for his mother.

"There are so many people out there who care for Donna. If there was ever a time to offer Donna and Sumitra support, now is it," says Miller.



Donna Red Wing

An account has been established at the Bank of America, Hollywood Branch, in Portland, to help with the couple's expenses. Those who wish to help can make checks out to "Friends of Red Wing," which can be sent to the bank or to A.C. Miller, 5916 NE Wygant St., Portland, OR 97218. Cards and letters of support should be sent to Miller. For more information, please call 281-7340.