

In 1999 she'll party

City Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury, a longtime ally, announces that this term is her last

by Inga Sorensen

Gretchen Kafoury is retiring—in three years.

"I think it took a lot of people by surprise when I announced that," admits Kafoury, who is serving her second term on the Portland City Council.

The 53-year-old commissioner made the declaration in mid-October during Right to Privacy PAC's Lucille Hart Dinner, a major fund-raiser for the statewide gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization.

One of the annual dinner's traditions calls upon all public office holders and political candidates in attendance to step on stage and introduce themselves. When it came her turn, Kafoury announced her name and title, and added that she was retiring—a proclamation that prompted many quizzical looks among the audience.

"I've had people who were at the dinner come up to me since then and ask me what's going on. Yes, I'm retiring, but at the end of my term. Maybe I said it too soon," she says, adding, "I'm retiring because I'm tired."

And it's no wonder. Kafoury has been involved in Oregon government and politics for two decades. She was first elected to the state House of Representatives in 1977, where she served for six years before joining the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners in 1985. In 1990, Kafoury won a seat on the Portland City Council, and she was re-elected to the post four years later.

"Gretchen was one of the first, if not the first political person in Oregon to be openly supportive of gay and lesbian rights," says longtime gay and lesbian rights advocate John Baker, who co-founded Right to Privacy in 1982 and is currently the president of the Keeston Lowery chapter of the Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club. Baker has traveled in Portland's gay and lesbian political circles since the mid-1970s.

"I can remember one of the first fund-raisers that the gay community ever had for political candidates," recounts Baker. "We held it at Victoria's Nephew [a Portland cafe operated by celebrated art gallery owner William Jamison, who passed away earlier this year from AIDS complications.] Gretchen and [then-state representative] Vera Katz showed up. We charged a couple of dollars at the door. I think we raised about \$30."

"I've always been involved in progressive politics," says Kafoury, who is staunchly pro-choice, pro-gay rights and pro-gun control. "Supporting gay and lesbian rights was simply a logical outgrowth from my involvement in the women's and black civil rights movement. It just made sense."

As a state lawmaker, Kafoury pushed hard for lesbian and gay rights legislation. She was awarded RTP's first Lucille Hart Award for her work on behalf of sexual minority rights, and she has vigorously denounced anti-gay-rights efforts. Kafoury has appeared on the gay cable television program *NightScene* and has been on hand for innumerable gay and lesbian events. As a city commissioner, she has advocated for the hiring of more women

and minorities.

When Andrew Dice Clay, the notoriously sexist, racist and homophobic comic, was set to appear at Portland's Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in February 1991, Kafoury and her council colleagues issued a letter to the "Citizens of Portland," asking those who had purchased tickets to the event to return them. They wrote: "We must raise our voices in protest against 'entertainment' which [perpetuates] negative attitudes and stereotypes.... We do not support racism, sexism, and humor based on violence against people because of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age or national origin."

"Gretchen has consistently taken stands against discrimination and oppression in all areas, including gay and lesbian issues," says human rights advocate Kathleen Saadat, who headed up the state's affirmative action program in the late 1980s before leaving to become Kafoury's aide at the Portland City Council. (She has since moved on.)

It was during this period when the Portland City Council unanimously approved an ordinance barring discrimination based on several classifications—including sexual orientation—in housing, employment and public accommodations. Saadat says Kafoury's support for the ordinance never wavered.

This was also the time when Saadat decided to come out publicly as a lesbian. (A November 1991 *Just Out* cover story profiling Saadat was the primary vehicle.) "I went to Gretchen and told her that this *Just Out* article was going to be coming out. She said 'That's great. Wonderful.' And that was that. No big deal," says Saadat, adding, "Gretchen has always had tremendous courage."

Kafoury, who grew up in the wheat lands of Walla Walla, Wash., says another important factor may have contributed to her early awareness and acceptance of gay men and lesbians.

"I had a gay uncle. Of course back then the family didn't talk about him being gay, but we all knew," she says. He was an interior decorator who lived in Los Angeles. "We would travel together, and we were close. It was an important experience for me, given that I was growing up in a place where I had little exposure to different types of people."

She adds: "By 1969 I already knew lots and lots of gay people."

Come 1999 [when her term expires], Kafoury would like to transition into teaching. She is currently taking classes at Portland State University, where she's completing her master's degree in public administration.

As for other things she'd like to do: "I play the piano and I am an avid reader. I also love the beach. I don't spend nearly as much time at my beach house [in Arch Cape] as I'd like. Maybe soon I'll have more time."

"I feel like there is a real core of young progressives out there who can take over, so that makes me feel better about my decision," she says. "But I'm disappearing. Trust me. I'll be around, I'll just be doing other things."



Gretchen Kafoury

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