

REGIONAL POLITICS

Changing of the guard

Seattle bids adieu to one lesbian council member while welcoming another

by Inga Sorensen

Role model to ring in New Year on new path

Change, some advertisers will tell you, is good. There are times, however, when change simply is not a matter of choice. "The first thing we're going to do is pack up the grandkids and head to Disney World for a week. After that, who knows?" says 39-year-old Sherry Harris, with a shrug in her voice. Next month she steps down from her position on the Seattle City Council, a job she has held the past four years.

Gay men and lesbians throughout the nation herald Harris as a leader and role model. After all, she is the country's first openly lesbian African American publicly elected official. That prominence, however, was not enough to place her back on the council for a second term. In last month's election she lost her re-election bid by 3 percent.

"I have to admit that I was shocked. You don't run for public office thinking you're going to lose. It took me a full three days to comprehend that this had really happened," says Harris, adding candidly, "It hurt."

Like so many of this region's dwellers, Harris was lured to the Pacific Northwest by its sheer beauty and promise of opportunity.

"I remember looking at a brochure which featured the most spectacular picture of Mount Rainier and thinking to myself, that's for me," recounts Harris, who was born and raised in a single-parent home in Newark, N.J., a tattered and tough urban enclave that held limited prospects for those who stayed.

"I thought this was the most beautiful place, and Seattle the most wonderful city," says Harris, who embarked on a 3,000-mile, east-to-west trek to take an engineering job with Boeing.

That was back in 1978. Jimmy Carter was president. Steinem-esque feminism was in vogue. Harris, in fact, came out thanks to one of those

tried-and-true consciousness-raising groups (remember those?), a chatty catalyst for many an emerging lesbian. It was a pre-Starbucks era (remember that?), a time when most people in the United States probably couldn't find Seattle on the map.

When Harris arrived, opportunity abounded.

"I got my first real job, my first real paycheck," she says.

And she fell in love. "I went to a poetry reading where I listened to this woman who was so good. I went up to her afterward and told her how much I enjoyed the reading. About a month later I got a call from her asking me out for coffee," Harris laughs.

That was that. Fifteen years and four grandchildren later, Harris and her partner, Judith Scalise, a poet/retail outlet manager, are still together. In addition to the grandchildren, all of whom live in Seattle (their ages range from 1 to 13), Harris last year brought her 64-year-old mother out from the Northeast to live in the Emerald City.

The duo share time with the grandchildren, and attend services together at the New Hope Baptist Church.

"When I first came here my mother thought it was just a place with lumberjacks and log trucks,"

says Harris. "When she first visited she was kind of surprised to see that there was actually a big city here.... She likes Seattle, but she's still working on meeting people. It's hard when you leave your friends behind."

What was hard for Harris was losing her re-election bid to Seattle Police Sgt. John Manning. It was also painful, she admits, being tagged as an ineffective city councilor by a survey of political insiders and civic activists.

"When I look back, I think I would have done things differently. I didn't conduct a negative campaign. I didn't want to, but I probably should have focused more on my opponent's background," Harris says, adding that she believes she had the full support of Seattle's gay and lesbian community. "They were great. It would have been terrible to be in [failed San Francisco mayoral

candidate] Roberta Achtenberg's shoes. I believe that much of the gay community in San Francisco did not support her."

While being an out lesbian may have been an asset in some ways, Harris wonders whether it made the difference in the race.

"We did a poll asking people if they knew that a candidate was gay whether they would be less

likely to vote for them," she says. "About 30 percent said they would indeed by less likely."

Despite her loss, Harris says she is proud of her list of accomplishments, including securing city funds for Lambert House, which caters to sexual minority youth, pushing for city domestic partnership registration, and amending workplace harassment policies to include sexual orientation, among other things.

During her tenure, she traveled to 40 cities talking about gay and lesbian rights issues and speaking out against anti-gay initiatives, particularly in neighboring Oregon. She says she was the first candidate endorsed by the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund back in 1991, and she pushed for the formation of a National League of Cities gay and lesbian caucus.

"The organization already had an African American caucus, a Hispanic caucus, a women's caucus. I felt it was important there be a gay caucus, a move which was met with some resistance," says Harris. "I just kept pushing until I got it."

As for whether she feels her time away from Seattle promoting gay rights in other parts of the nation hurt her re-election bid, Harris says: "I don't think so. This is an issue that affects all of us. And I did a lot of things locally."

Harris says she's not ruling out another run for public office. Or maybe she'll publish a book.

"I think I have a story to tell," she says.

Until then, Harris will spend time with her family.

"That's how I relax. There's something incredible about watching the children grow," she says. "First you roll the ball to them, then you're playing catch. The next thing you know, they're out there playing baseball. To see them grow is a gift."



Sherry Harris

Even rich dykes need a little support

We have this group called Babes with Bucks. It's a bunch of women who get together for potlucks. It gives us an opportunity to speak freely about money—about the stigma attached to having it. We also share ideas about philanthropic possibilities," says Tina Podlodowski, who will begin serving her first term on the Seattle City Council as Harris steps down.

Ten years ago, when she was just 25, Podlodowski headed west from her native Connecticut to begin her career in computer engineering. Call it awesome instincts, good luck or sheer brains, this daughter of blue-collar Polish immigrants took a cut in pay to join 600 other employees working for a little-known company called Microsoft.

"I liked what I saw, so I took a \$10,000 pay cut to take that job. In return I was given this thing called stock options," laughs Podlodowski. "At the time, I didn't know whether I'd ever make up for that pay cut."

Today she is a millionaire.

"So it means we'll buy a new car every six years instead of every eight years," says Podlodowski, who most recently purchased a Volvo 850, which she describes as "the ultimate baby car," a vehicle

she now needs.

"My partner's expecting a baby tomorrow," she told us in a matter-of-fact tone.

That's right, a baby. And it's not coming via Federal Express, either. It was being birthed (thanks to donor insemination) by her partner of four years, Chelle Mileur, who also comes out of the high-tech industry.

"We know it's a girl, but we don't know what we're going to name her yet," says Podlodowski. "We were attempting to get some consensus among our families about what relative to name her after, but I think we're going to forgo that and not name her after anyone."

If becoming a new parent isn't enough change, next month Podlodowski will officially begin her job as a member of the Seattle City Council, where she expects to put in "60, 70, 80 hours a week."

"My partner and I are used to seven-day work

weeks," she says, adding that Mileur will be a full-time, stay-at-home mom. "But we'll make sure we have plenty of quality family time."

Kids have always been important to this couple.

They met while volunteering for a program that assists children directly affected by HIV and AIDS. The two also provide substantial financial support to the Seattle Children's Museum, as well as a host of other causes, most notably the Pride Foundation. The two dedicate 20 percent of their annual incomes to charitable causes.

"We felt it was important that there be a very visible lesbian couple—with a baby—who were involved in the museum.

People need to see gay and lesbian parents. It goes a long way in breaking down those negative stereotypes."

As a city councilor, Podlodowski will have a rich opportunity to do just that. (She got off to a



Tina Podlodowski

healthy beginning by defeating her opponent with 64 percent of the vote.)

"Why did I run? Because I feel that I have something to contribute, and it's really vital that good people run for public office," says Podlodowski.

Her immigrant parents instilled in her a work-horse attitude toward school, job and community service, she says. Both are in their 70s and live on the East Coast.

"My mom's kind of a tough cookie, but I know that they're both proud of me."

Podlodowski says the campaign held few surprises for her, thanks in part to a Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund training that provided helpful hints. During the months heading up to the election, she attended 90 house parties and says, "People didn't care about my sexual orientation. They had questions about potholes, the city budget and how to get results."

And that's what voters expect her to do during the next four years—get results.

To relax, Podlodowski says she reads (most recent books: *China Wakes* and *The Alienist*), goes to movies (she gives *Home for the Holidays* a big thumbs down) and cooks. Her prize dish? A mushroom, scallop and shrimp risotto.

Move over, Martha Stewart.