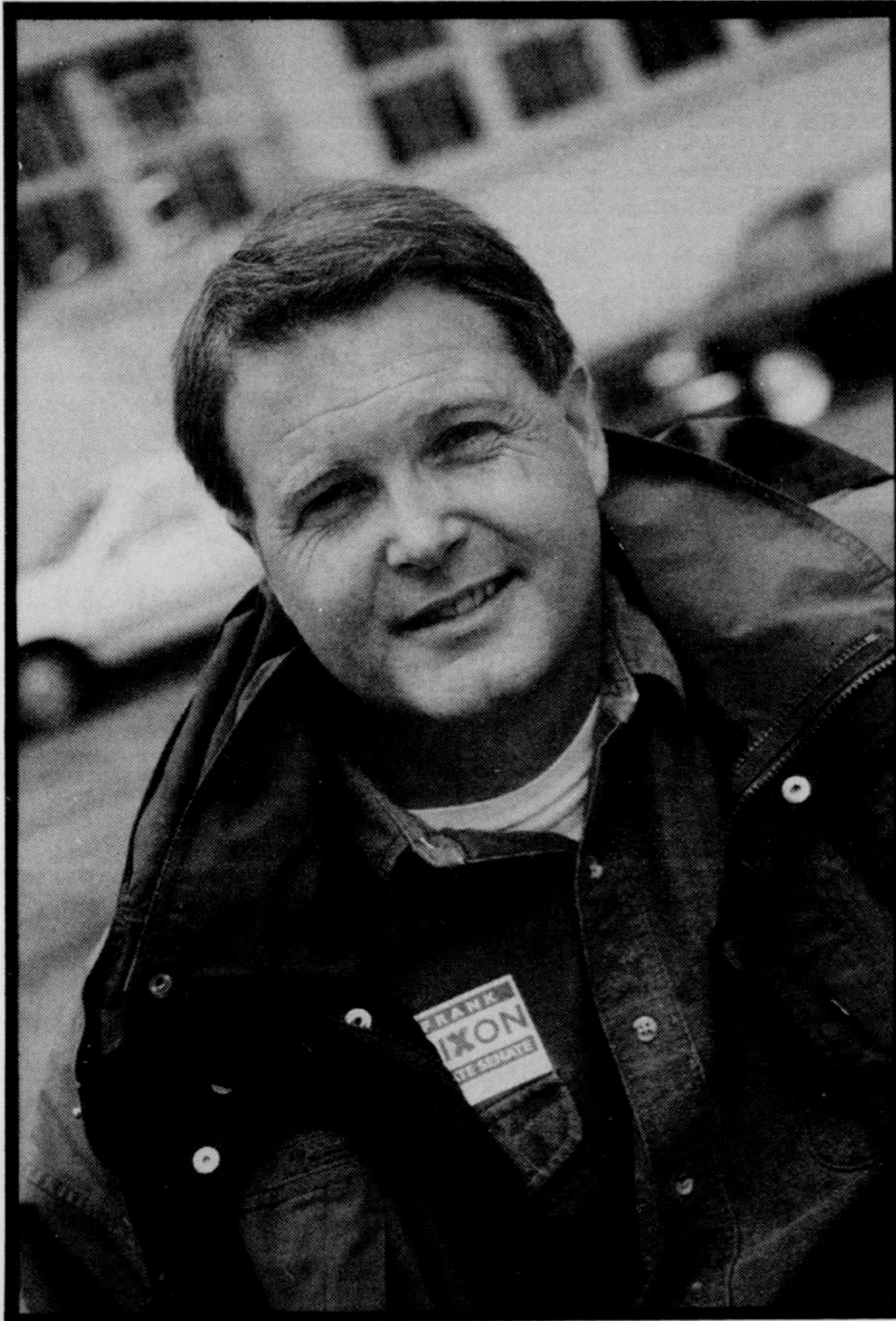


PRIMARY PRIMER

just out takes an intimate look at the gay and lesbian candidates facing opponents in the May 21 election

STORY BY INGA SORESENSEN • PHOTOS BY LINDA KIEWER



Frank Dixon

Frank Dixon Democratic candidate for Oregon Senate District 6

Do you want to know why I'm here?" Roni Lang asks me rhetorically as I close up an interview with Frank Dixon, an openly gay consumer attorney, neighborhood activist, and U.S. Army veteran.

If you haven't heard of her by now, the transgendered Lang (who prefers the single name Roni) is engaged with a potpourri of community groups and causes including the Northwest Gender Alliance, Portland Community Bowling Association, Sexual Minority Roundtable, Coalition for Community Communication, and Veterans for Human Rights, just to name a few. You can now attach "spirited 'Frank Dixon for Oregon Senate' volunteer" to the list.

The cherry blossoms are in full sprout on this uncharacteristically warm afternoon in early April, and Roni, who has been quietly perched before a computer screen in Dixon's spacious Northwest Portland home, takes a break to say hello and

make a personal plug for Dixon, who is running for the Oregon Senate seat being vacated by Dick Springer (D-Portland).

"Frank really believes in protecting the human rights of all people," says Roni, a 60-plus-year-old former U.S. Air Force service member and retired Tektronix employee who lives openly and comfortably as a woman "80 to 90 percent of the time."

"[Dixon] has said he'll lead the way on the transgendered and transsexual issue at the state Legislature, and I believe him. That's why I'm here today," she says.

In his quest for the Senate, Dixon is facing three opponents: Kent Snyder, Ginny Burdick and former state Rep. Tom Mason, a candidate with strong name recognition—and a selection that Right To Privacy views as a poor choice, due to his stands on gay rights and women's reproductive freedom issues.

"I was actually looking forward to doing some nonfiction writing," says Dixon, 45, a professorial-appearing man who sounds a smidgen like *Prairie Home Companion's* Garrison Keillor.

We're sitting on the second-story deck that rests off the bedroom. Mount Hood is popping up

from the east. It's 2 pm, and all one has to do to know how hot it is, is peek at the panting Venus—Dixon's 5-year-old "pick of the litter" boxer, a goofy but immensely sweet dog.

"I was sitting on this porch last August with [longtime lesbian and gay rights advocates and politicians] Don Powell, Fred Ross and Charlotte Comito. They said I should run," explains Dixon, when asked about his decision to enter the race.

"They were all pretty intense," he continues. "I took several weeks to think about it and talked it over with Dan [Volkmer, Dixon's partner of 14 years]. Two factors really prompted me to get involved. First, I felt that I could indeed provide leadership in the Senate, and do a good job representing the people of this district. I also believe that the Republicans are pushing an extreme agenda, and I felt uncomfortable not doing anything about that."

Dixon can be described as a progressive and pragmatic Democrat who supports healthy schools and neighborhoods, nondiscrimination legislation, community policing, affordable health care, and women's reproductive freedoms.

He graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1973. A year later he graduated from the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga., after being commissioned as a second lieutenant. After serving two years of active duty, Dixon entered the Northwestern Law School at Lewis & Clark College, graduating in 1979. He retired as an Army Reserve major in 1995 and earned two Army Commendation Medals.

Dixon is a former president of the Northwest District Association and chair of Neighbors West/ Northwest. He has served on both the Portland Police Chief's Forum and the Portland Police Internal Investigations Auditing Committee. Additionally, he has been a Democratic precinct person and treasurer of the Oregon Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club, as well as director of Veterans for Human Rights, a war veterans group formed in 1992 to work to lift the ban on openly gay and lesbian people in the military.

If elected, Dixon would become Oregon's first openly gay state senator.

"[Coming out] was a pretty torturous route until I was 28 or 29," Dixon answers, when asked about the more personal aspects of his life. "Up until then I was very unclear and unsettled about who I was. But around 1979 or 1980, I sought resolve. I moved to Northwest Portland [he had been residing in other sections of the city and was living "more of a bisexual lifestyle" prior to that point]. I decided to just do it."

And that's the way it's been ever since. He met Volkmer and the two have created a life together.

"During our first years we were like a lot of couples—anxious and new to each other," says Dixon. "The relationship has changed—and I think gotten fuller and better—over the years. Dan is one of my most active supporters."

When asked whether he has felt scared or insecure during this campaign, Dixon candidly replies: "All the time. If you really think about everything, it's easy to feel scared. I envy Kate Brown [who is running unopposed], but you just have to take things one day at a time."

He adds: "I think what really surprised me about this campaign is how all-consuming it is. There is a lot of sacrifice. I have a newfound insight and respect for any candidate and politician because of this experience."

The day *Just Out* met with Dixon, hundreds of lawn signs were piled on his ground-floor porch. I'm told that a slew of "lesbians with drills" put the signs together a few days before.

Lesbians with drills and a mission. And it wouldn't take long for those signs to begin cropping up throughout the district, along with numerous pro-Dixon bus benches.

Being a former military man—from a military family, no less—Dixon stands straight-backed tall. It's a little ironic that he refers to his mother, who is now 80 and living in Minnesota, as Mother.

"Mother doesn't like to talk about it," says Dixon, referring to his sexual orientation.

Nonetheless, Mother Dixon played the good sport when her son and his partner took her to see Pink Martini a few months back.

"I don't think she had a martini—when we were there, at least," he laughs.

Dixon has been endorsed by many individuals and organizations, including RTP PAC, the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, the Sierra Club, Oregon AFL-CIO, and the Portland Rainbow Coalition.

For a break after the primary, Dixon plans to delve into a stack of books awaiting his attention, including Greg Louganis' *Breaking the Surface*, an honest-yet-cheesy autobiography; Garrison Keillor's *Book of Guys*; Mario Cuomo's slim governmental fix-it guide, *Reason to Believe*; and David James Duncan's *The Brothers K*. To further relax, Dixon is content to work out at the gym. A Soloflex machine sits in the bedroom with clothes draped all over it.

"That's Dan's," says Dixon, who lifts weights at Multnomah Athletic Club. "I just started a year ago."

"Going to get buff?" I ask.

"I hope so," he laughs. "But there are other things to do right now."

Bob Duehmig Democratic candidate for Oregon House District 12

Bob Duehmig's makeshift campaign office is fun to look at.

Tucked in the basement of his John's Landing bungalow just a couple of blocks off bustling Southwest Macadam Avenue, the office is cluttered with a huge American flag and a poster that instructs us to "Stand Up for Working Families."

A sprawling Oregon Political Primary Calendar, which lists relevant political info—"It's amazing the stuff they send you when you file for office," says Duehmig—and an Oregon School District map cover the walls. There's also a photo of a then-bearded Duehmig shaking hands with Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber, whom Duehmig vigorously campaigned for.

A small television sits in a corner staring at a futon. A washing machine thumps and whirs in the background.

"I have to do something about that," says Duehmig. "Maybe put up a wall or something."

We make our way back upstairs to a cozy little living room, where the croonings of k.d. lang and the mellow sounds of Natalie Merchant linger.

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