

local news

Turning the tables

Survey in, survey out: Avel Gordly is quizzing potential endorsers on their commitment to change

by Inga Sorensen

Avel Gordly thinks it's important for people to move outside their circles of comfort.

"It's been my observation during the past 20 years as a community activist and organizer, that whenever there is a rally to action, only the affected community shows up. Time and time again we have to scramble to see where our allies are. I want to see us really start walking the talk," says Gordly, a state representative who is running for the Oregon Senate for District 10, which covers portions of Multnomah County.

Gordly, a liberal Democrat, announced her Senate bid several months ago, due in part to her concerns that too many policy-makers have a "limited vision" because—simply put—people representing diverse backgrounds and experiences don't have a seat at the legislative table.

The 48-year-old lawmaker, who lives in Northeast Portland, has launched her own enterprising project to find out if potential endorsers are walking the human rights talk themselves.

In essence, Gordly is turning the tables and putting the question to the questioner by sending questionnaires to nearly two dozen organizations that have surveyed Gordly about her position on various matters.

"Each of the organizations that has requested me to fill out a survey is getting the same letter," says Gordly.

Among the groups Gordly sent questionnaires to: the Oregon Public Employees Union, the Portland Association of Teachers, Oregon Right to Life, the League of Women Voters, the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, the Oregon Education Association, Oregon NARAL, the Portland Rainbow Coalition, and Right to Privacy.

Gordly asked organizations to describe steps

they have taken "to include people of color and other often underrepresented groups into [their membership]" and decision-making process.

She asked organizations if they opposed the anti-gay, anti-immigration, and anti-affirmative action initiatives being circulated, and whether they supported an initiative to increase the minimum wage in Oregon.

Additionally, Gordly asked environmental groups "what steps [they] have taken to address the issue of environmental justice; specifically, challenging policies that lead to the polluting of areas where there are high concentrations of people of color and poor families?"

When *Just Out* spoke with Gordly, she had only received a handful of responses.

"Right to Privacy said they were glad that I was doing this," says Gordly, who adds that the project was designed to provoke thought. "I only received one response so far that kind of surprised me."

That response, she says, came from Lisa Horowitz, executive director of Oregon NARAL, an organization that promotes and strives to protect abortion rights and women's reproductive freedom.

"She wrote that she was disappointed that there wasn't a question about choice," says

Gordly. "I was surprised and a little offended because it seemed to highlight this old tension between white women with a certain agenda and women of color who are feminist and doing good work, but may not necessarily be focused on [choice]," she says.

"I certainly respect Avel's decision to turn the tables, as it's been characterized," says Horowitz, "but frankly, I am disappointed there wasn't a question about choice. She asks about the minimum wage, immigration, affirmative action and gay rights, but nothing about choice."



Avel Gordly

PHOTO BY JULIE KEEFE

The Oregon Citizens Alliance is pushing two initiatives, one which would restrict the rights of gay men and lesbians, and another that would limit women's reproductive freedom. Both are aimed for the November ballot.

"I looked at the questionnaire and quite honestly thought something was missing," says Horowitz, adding that Oregon NARAL has not endorsed Gordly in the May 21 primary because the candidate, who is unopposed, did not complete NARAL's required questionnaire.

Horowitz says she and Gordly had planned to get together to further discuss the issue, but the

meeting has been delayed due to the recent death of state Sen. Bill McCoy.

Last session, Gordly, who is a longtime human rights advocate, promoted the Racial and Ethnic Justice Act of 1995, which was based on the recommendations of a state Supreme Court Task Force report that essentially found there are two systems of justice in Oregon—one for white people and a less equitable one for people of color.

She has represented House District 19 since 1991 and is the chief sponsor of the initiative designed to increase the minimum wage.

Celebrate or demonstrate: Oregon joins in Supreme Response activities

Human rights advocates in Oregon are planning a response to the pending U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Amendment 2, the controversial anti-gay-rights initiative approved by Colorado voters in 1992. Only a handful of potential announcement days remain during the Supreme Court's session. Those days are: May 13, 20, 28 and June 3, 10, 17 or 24.

"At this point I think many people believe the decision is going to be a muddled one," says Julie Davis, executive director for Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide organization whose primary goals include combating anti-gay-rights initiatives and securing basic rights for all Oregonians.

"We're planning a rally in response to the ruling, whatever it may be," she says. The group has also set up an Action Alert Hotline, which includes updated information about the rally and other Basic Rights Oregon activities.

According to Davis, Basic Rights Oregon is sponsoring a rally slated for the Sunday following the high court's decision. The gathering will be held at 1 pm at Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland. She says she has contacted the offices of Gov. John Kitzhaber and state Attorney General Ted Kulongoski to request their presence at the rally.

"The governor has really taken the lead on this in terms of instructing the attorney general to pull together the amicus brief," says Davis.

Several months ago Oregon officials filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in opposition to Amendment 2.

"Because we're not exactly sure when the rally will be, we haven't gotten an answer yet,"

says Davis, "but I'm hopeful they'll be there."

Representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon, Basic Rights Oregon and other organizations are expected to speak at the rally.

"It will likely be unclear what the ruling means to Oregon, and we'll have people on hand who should be able to offer some clarity," says Davis. "Whatever the decision, I think the [Oregon Citizens Alliance] will still be able to circulate its petitions to place an anti-gay-rights initiative on the ballot."

The Washington, D.C.-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in conjunction with some Colorado human rights organizations and others, has launched the "Supreme Response: A National Day of Action" in anticipation of the ruling.

NGLTF is encouraging people nationwide to turn out for either a celebration or demonstration in their local communities after the decision is announced.

Some of the communities where actions are planned include Denver and Colorado Springs; San Diego; New York City; Philadelphia; Indianapolis; Seattle; Madison, Wis.; and Norfolk, Va.

Amendment 2, which has never taken effect due to court challenges, would dismantle existing laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, and bar future measures from taking effect.

In 1992 and 1994 the OCA unsuccessfully pushed two similar measures, and it is promoting another anti-gay initiative poised for the November ballot.

Inga Sorensen

The Action Alert Hotline may be reached by calling 233-3324; to become a Basic Rights Oregon volunteer, call 222-6151.

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