

Once and for all

A new video aims to dispel the myth that the jobs of gay men and lesbians are already protected by law

by Inga Sorensen

Is it legal to fire someone for simply being gay or lesbian?

Pose that question to Oregonians and the overwhelming majority will say that gay men and lesbians are currently legally protected from sexual orientation employment discrimination—that's according to 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. The group recently unveiled its "Fair Workplace" video, which is designed to educate employers and the general public about a tough legal reality: People throughout Oregon can be fired from their jobs, with no legal recourse, based solely on their perceived sexual orientation.

"Eight out of 10 people don't know that. Black, white, male, female—across the board, most Oregonians believe that gay men and lesbians are already legally protected from employment discrimination [based on sexual orientation]," says Davis.

Legislation barring discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment has been considered by Oregon state lawmakers for two decades—to no avail. State and federal laws explicitly protect other classes, such as those based on race and gender, but fail to include sexual orien-

tion.

"There is a great deal of ignorance surrounding this issue, and the first thing we need to do to fix the problem is educate people about the facts," says Davis.

The "Fair Workplace" video runs about 7 minutes and features legal specialists; representatives from business, labor and civil rights communities; and gay and lesbian citizens who say they have personally fallen victim to employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Former Oregon Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer, retired Oregon Supreme Court Justice Betty Roberts, and Portland attorney Charlie Hinkle are among the legal experts who explain in concise, layperson terms that Oregon law, while protecting other specific classes of people, does not explicitly include sexual orientation.

During past legislative sessions, some opponents of protective legislation have argued that gay men and lesbians are not discriminated against in the workplace. To make their case they point to a lack of adequate documentation. Increasingly, however, gay men and lesbians who believe they have been discriminated against are stepping forth.

One such person, who is included in the footage, is Janice Grounds, 39, a former Nordstrom employee who worked for the corporation for nearly a decade before quitting in 1993. Grounds,



Julie Davis

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

who now owns a coffee shop in Tigard, says she left Nordstrom after she was denied 26 promotions. Grounds believes she smashed up against a glass ceiling because she is a lesbian.

Grounds subsequently sued Nordstrom, but on March 15 in Seattle, a King County Superior Court jury voted 11-1 that she failed to prove Nordstrom discriminated against her due to her sexual orientation.

"We encourage people who think they may have been fired for being gay or lesbian to give us a call," says Davis.

In the video, Alice Dale, executive director of Oregon Public Employees Union, talks about how the lack of legal protections for gay men and lesbians has prompted her union to step up its efforts to secure protections based on sexual orientation via the collective bargaining process. Bruce Samson, senior vice president of public affairs for Northwest Natural Gas, stresses his company's

philosophy of supporting employees who "do a good job" regardless of sexual orientation.

"This is a very matter-of-fact video. We just spell out the reality, plain and simple," says Davis. "We did that on purpose in order to avoid any controversy about 'promoting homosexuality.' We kept a very narrow focus, which will hopefully appeal to a broader spectrum of people."

According to Davis, there is another version of the video that is targeted toward a more activist, "already on board" audience. She says that version will probably be used during house parties and other Basic Rights Oregon events.

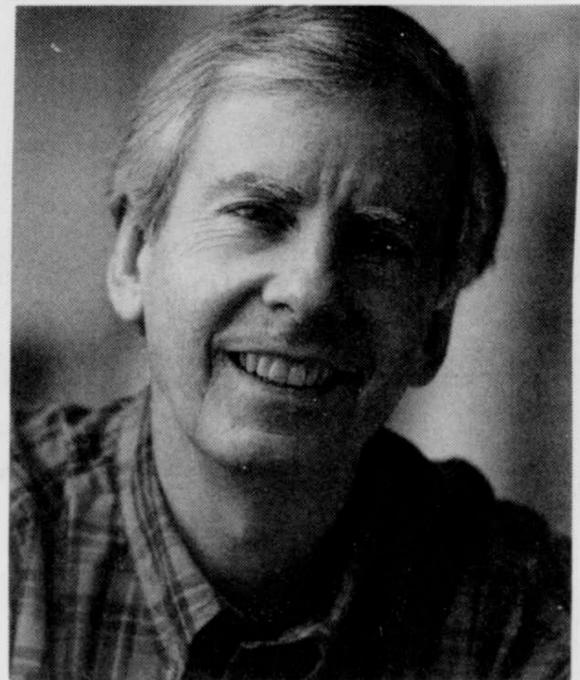
Davis says a handful of companies have already expressed an interest in "Fair Workplace," including Bank of America, Nike and Nordstrom. She adds that those interested in having the video shown in their workplace should contact Basic Rights Oregon at 222-6151.

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