

PORTLAND PRIDE '96

Chering our pain

Chastity Bono enjoys her new job as an HRC spokeswoman, but don't ask about her mother

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by Inga Sorensen

It really bothers me when I see people doing my mother in drag. I mean, just imagine if you saw people doing that with *your* mother," chirps Chastity Bono, daughter of (oh no, here we go again) Cher and Sonny, currently representing the GOP in D.C.

As you probably know, the baby Bono, now a very adult 27, served as grand marshal for Portland's annual queer pride parade. Just three weeks earlier she keynoted at Salem's lesbian and gay pride.

Bono had already made an appearance in Salt Lake City, and immediately following her stint in the Rose City she was heading to the airport so she could make the pride bash in her native Los Angeles.

"Aside from people repeatedly asking me about my mother, this job is great," says Bono, who is touring the nation as a spokeswoman for the Human Rights Campaign's National Coming Out Project, which urges lesbians and gay men to be honest about their sexual orientation and dispel the myths about their lives.

"It's so uplifting to see so many people who are out and proud and working toward our civil rights. You folks here in Oregon have done such a tremendous job with that. You are a terrific role model," says Bono, who until a 1995 interview with *The Advocate*, a national lesbian and gay newsmagazine, was out to some friends, but not much more than that.

"I was in the closet," she says more bluntly. "I knew from a young age that I was different. It really clicked for me when I was around 13 and saw *Personal Best*. When I watched that love scene, the light bulb went on."

It took years, however, for her to really grapple with the concept of Chastity As Lesbian.

"It was 1986 and I was in New York, and I accidentally rode my bike into the Gay Pride Parade," laughs Bono. "I mean, there I was on Christopher Street in the middle of all of this. I was in complete shock. It's one of those moments in life that you just don't forget."

Bono did eventually become romantically involved with a woman, but was soon confronted with life-and-death issues. Although in her mid-20s, she was forced to transform from carefree



Chastity Bono

baby dyke to full-time caretaker for her partner, Joan, who was battling non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

Bono stayed at the hospital with Joan; she gave Joan her medicine. When Joan died (two-and-a-half years ago) Bono prepared funeral and interment arrangements. Tall tasks, particularly for someone so young.

Roughly at the same time, Bono was fending off nosy journalists who were eager to out her. Tabloid newspapers actually did out her in the early '90s, but it wasn't until the *Advocate* article that Bono spoke with a reporter and consensually went public about her sexual orientation. Bono

has since become a columnist for the publication.

"It's been an incredible journey. It's all been absolutely positive. The closet is no place for me," says Bono, who nonetheless shares a peeve or two regarding her more heightened profile.

"People say, 'I remember seeing you on TV when...'" says Bono, who most of us know as that cute little kid who popped on stage for the closing moments of *The Sonny and Cher Show*.

"I have heard that a million times," says Bono, who is more than a tad tired of it. "It gets old. Imagine if you had to hear that over and over and over again."

Sometimes, she adds, people can get a little weird. "There was a period where I was doing some bartending for a [women's] bar in L.A. called Girl Bar. There was this woman once who came up to me and said we were somehow linked because [as a valet] she had once parked my mom's car," Bono explains.

"Later on she said we were linked because people said we looked alike when we were little. I just wanted her to stop bothering me. A while later an old friend dropped in and we agreed to get together and catch up. I went to hand my friend a piece of paper with my telephone number on it and out of nowhere Valet Woman comes swooping down and grabs the paper.... Occasionally odd things like that will happen. Luckily, I've never seen her again."

Bono says she pretty much waves such discomforts aside. She does the same with criticisms of her father, who is backing federal legislation barring same-sex marriage, as well as Bill Clinton, who has vowed to sign the measure into law.

"There are many fair-minded people out there who still have difficulty with the concept of same-sex marriage," says Bono. "It may not be easy for us to support Clinton, but we have to be realistic and look at the other option. We also have to keep educating the public."

Bono plans to play her part via her HRC tour and *Advocate* writings. But she also intends to—at least occasionally—kick back with partner Laura LaMastro. The couple, who live in San Francisco, have been together two years.

"Our life has changed somewhat since I went public," says Bono, who describes herself as a "very domestic sort of person."

For example, Bono says that in the past if she were going away for a couple of days she would make some meals in advance that LaMastro could warm up.

"She fixes things," laughs Bono. "She's not the cook."

But her busy schedule has thrown a wrench into the Bono-LaMastro meal plan. "I don't get a chance to do that anymore, so Laura's like, 'Hey, where's my turkey and potatoes?' But it's fun and it's worth it," says Bono. "We have an incredible opportunity to make positive changes in society."

Chavez sham

Who was that tattooed man?

Those of you who hung around for the latter portion of Portland's Pride Rally were subjected to a compelling mea culpa from a man claiming to be the brother of deceased United Farm Workers founder Cesar Chavez, who for decades fought for the rights of impoverished laborers.

Problem is, the supposed sibling was a fake. "He looked like a man who was having nothing less than a religious experience," says Susan Leo, chair of Pride Northwest Inc., which orchestrated this year's queer pride festivities.

Leo, the introducer of rally speakers, says she was approached by a "very, very nice person" declaring himself to be Damian Chavez, brother of Cesar, and the UFW's current head of security.

"He asked if he could make a statement," explains Leo. "I was so swamped with everything and he had just enough detailed information about UFW to seem authentic. Looking back on it, I probably should have asked for ID, but who thought anything like *this* would happen?"

In a graciously spontaneous gesture, Leo escorted the phony Chavez onto the stage, and the impersonator proceeded to launch into a riveting tale about how the UFW had fired two women for being lesbians.

"I feel so much shame," he told the highly attentive audience.

The trickster went on to say he was so moved by the love and unity he felt during Lesbian and



The faux Chavez with Susan Leo

Gay Pride that he was immediately reinstating the women at a salary four times the amount they had been earning prior to their dismissal.

He also pledged that UFW would no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation and would stand proudly with queer people.

Mr. Masquerader's soliloquy received a standing ovation.

"Lots of people went up to him afterwards to express their appreciation. He bought a T-shirt. He even went out that night with people he met at Pride and drank a couple of bottles of tequila,"

says Leo. "But it was all a scam."

Leo says she began to sense something was awry after she telephoned the Hilton—where the man said he was lodged for the weekend—and was informed no Damian Chavez was staying there.

"He also left me a couple of California numbers, which I called, and they led to nowhere," says Leo.

A lingering discomfort prompted her to call United Farm Workers of America a few days later. To her dismay (though not necessarily her surprise by this point), Leo was told there was no Damian Chavez, at least not one who is Cesar's brother or works for UFW.

"And we certainly don't discriminate. What did Cesar stand for? I mean *really*," says UFW spokeswoman Jocelyn Sherman, who says she has no idea who the impostor is.

"What I do know is that we are extremely upset that someone is going around misrepresenting UFW. It's outrageous," she says.

According to Leo, the man has four tattooed teardrops near his left eye. "He also had oodles of cash, and spent a lot of it on beer," she says. "He also said something like the UFW was controlling Latino gangs."

Leo is sending the duper's photograph to UFW. Anyone with information about the man's true identity is encouraged to call Pride Northwest at 295-9788 and leave a message for Leo.

Reported by Inga Sorensen