

local news

Transsexual rights activist Margaret Deirdre O'Hartigan is waging a very public, and some would say bitter, campaign to have a member of a Portland Police Bureau Crisis Response Team removed because that volunteer opposes the inclusion of specific references to transsexuals and cross-dressers in Portland's human rights ordinance.

Roni Lang, a cross-dressing heterosexual male who claims to live up to 90 percent of the time as a female, sent two letters to the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission outlining his opposition. (At Lang's request, we will from this point use the pronoun "she" when referring to Lang.)

Those letters were prompted by MHRC hearings held in late March and April, which, says commission executive director Helen Cheek, were designed to assess the level of discrimination against "transsexuals and other sexual minorities" in Portland.

The hearings could result in an amendment to the city's human rights ordinance—which already prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation—that explicitly includes protections for transsexuals. (MHRC is pulling together a report on the hearings, which is expected to be sent to the Portland City Council for consideration in the very near future.)

O'Hartigan was among those who testified in favor of inclusion and criticized the state Bureau of Labor and Industries' failure to investigate transsexuals' complaints of employment discrimination. Other supporters shared tales of harassment and voiced frustration with the insurance industry for refusing to cover sex-reassignment surgery.

Lang, who did not testify, instead sent MHRC a couple of missives. In one letter she said, "I have lived for the last 15 years in the female guise and never have been discriminated against, maybe snickered at a few times, but never denied any services or goods."

Lang further stated "the city charter is becoming too cluttered," and expressed the belief that many of the issues addressed by transsexuals can be rectified in other ways, e.g., by lobbying the insurance industry to cover sex-reassignment surgery, which it has traditionally considered cosmetic surgery.

Lang, whose list of community involvement includes the Sexual Minority Roundtable, Crisis Response Team and Northwest Gender Alliance, a social and support organization for cross-dressers and transsexuals, says she did not realize her letters would be made public. (They were copied and circulated by O'Hartigan, who describes Lang's actions as "anti-transsexual lobbying.")

"Listen, I don't totally disagree with what Margaret is trying to achieve," Lang tells *Just Out*. "I just don't necessarily think she's going about it in the proper manner. You know, she puts

Activists collide

Transsexual activist Margaret Deirdre O'Hartigan leads public effort to oust crossdresser Roni Lang from volunteer position

by Inga Sorensen

herself out there as though she's representing all of us. Well, she doesn't, and that's partly what I was trying to say through my letters."

"There were other people who opposed [the inclusion] but none used the abusive language that Roni did," says O'Hartigan. "Roni also lied in his letters." (O'Hartigan is aware of Lang's pronoun preference, but refuses to adhere to it because Lang described herself as a male in another publication.)

In an MHRC letter, Lang says of transsexuals: "Even though they dress as women and try to act as women, they still come across as men in dresses. If this person has an attitude, then I can understand why they may be discriminated against."

Lang also asked, "Who will be the next group to approach the city council for inclusion in the charter, one-eyed, peg-leg, bicycle riders that are discriminated against for not riding fast enough in the bike lane?"

O'Hartigan is further angered by Lang's assertion that "even the psychiatric manual, DSM-4, does not classify this condition as a mental disorder." O'Hartigan says the DSM-4 clearly states: "There are two components of Gender Identity Disorder, both of which must be present to make the diagnosis. There must be evidence of a strong and persistent cross-gender identification, which is the desire to be, or the insistence that one is, of the other sex.... There must also be evidence of persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex."

"That has been interpreted in different ways by different people," Lang says of the DSM-4 descriptive.

"We are concerned because the author of these transphobic letters is a volunteer with the Portland Police Bureau Sexual Minorities Crisis Response Team—which means Lang is called upon to assist queer victims of crime—including transsexual victims. At our

most vulnerable moments we may be subjected to prejudice and bigotry—and it will be the fault of the police," says O'Hartigan.

The Crisis Response Team, whose members are from the sexual minorities community, is designed to fulfill another major component of the Portland Police Bureau's partnership agreement with the sexual minorities community.

CRT is a group of screened volunteers who

provide emotional and practical support to sexual minority victims of crimes or traumatic accidents. CRT members are called to the scene by the police to assist victims and their families in the immediate wake of tragedy. In addition to providing emotional support, they will also make referrals to appropriate agencies, provide information and help in notifying family, friends and clergy.

"Lang's use of the Roundtable and Crisis Response Team to lend an air of legitimacy to his transphobic opinions reflects negatively upon each and every participant, and his holding up the physically challenged and transsexuals to ridicule is repugnant," says O'Hartigan.

"Were gays and lesbians the targets of his prejudiced comments there would be no question as to his unsuitability to participate in the Crisis Response Team—are transsexuals any less deserving of a sympathetic ear in time of trauma than gays and lesbians? Roni Lang's antipathy toward a segment of the sexual minorities community renders him unfit to serve on the Crisis Response Team, and cries out for his immediate dismissal," she says.

On June 11, O'Hartigan organized a protest against the Portland Police Bureau for "refusing to let transsexuals voice their concerns at the monthly Roundtable meeting." (O'Hartigan eventually did so at the July gathering.)

She accused Roundtable facilitator Mary Otto, a bureau employee, of refusing to schedule the issue on the May 14 meeting agenda.

O'Hartigan reacted by sending a letter to Portland Police Chief Charles Moose, charging him with violating the 1994 partnership agreement signed by the bureau and members of the sexual minorities community.

O'Hartigan says, "The agreement specifically states, 'The Roundtable will encourage the discussion and mediation of police-sexual minorities community conflicts.' Well, transsexuals are part of the sexual minorities community, and we have a conflict with the police over their infliction of Lang upon our community."

Moose responded via letter. It reads in part: "Roni Lang is a volunteer member of the Sexual Minority Crisis Response Team. Team members are trained and judged on their performance. Being a team member does not require one to forget one's personal beliefs and have opinions that satisfy everyone that is a member of the Sexual Minority Roundtable...."

"You and I have a different understanding of the partnership agreement. The clause 'The Roundtable will encourage the discussion and mediation of police-sexual minorities community conflict,' refers to conflicts between the

police and the sexual minority community. The issue you have raised is not a police-community conflict. I am sorry you are not happy with Roni Lang's letters to the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, but I believe we are all entitled to freedom of speech. Again, membership on the Response Team is based on performance. At this time there is no evidence that Roni Lang has refused to be helpful or compassionate to anyone while serving in the capacity of Response Team member."

LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project and a CRT member, says: "We don't get to pick and choose who the victims we'll have to deal with are," says Lewis, adding she was on CRT duty when a call came in involving a victim who happened to be a registered sex offender.

"I didn't let my personal feelings get in the way," she says. "If I had, I would and should have been dismissed.... We are evaluated on our performance on the scene rather than our personal feelings. That's the way it should be."

Bruce Prunk, a deputy chief and the bureau's liaison to the sexual minority community says, "Roni has always been very helpful and has not demonstrated a particular bias.... I'm sure we have

lots of people on the force who hold strong opinions about a lot of things. But when they're on the job, they do their job. If their beliefs affect performance, that's when you do something."

He adds, "We'd like to see Roni and Margaret resolve their issues between themselves."

Lewis echoes that sentiment: "I think this is more of a personal issue between Margaret and Roni."

There is apparently some history between the two, although neither classified it as a "personal conflict."

According to Lang, O'Hartigan threatened legal action a few years ago because someone wrote in a NWGA newsletter that O'Hartigan was a disruptive force. Lang, who says she took over the newsletter around that time, says she wrote a retraction. Lang says O'Hartigan ultimately dropped her legal threats.

"I've barely said a word to Margaret, so I don't think of this as a personal situation," says Lang.

Meanwhile, MHRC's Cheek says: "We received all kinds of letters expressing a wide variety of opinions on [the transsexual inclusion], and I think it is inappropriate to pull out one or two letters and use it against the author.... I think we're trying to do something positive here and it's a shame that the process may be being manipulated."

This isn't the first time O'Hartigan has led a public effort to create change. You may recall that last July she staged a protest at Portland's First Unitarian Church to denounce what she described as "17 years of anti-transsexual literature produced by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Beacon Press." Additionally, O'Hartigan has helped foster a name-change of Right to Privacy's flagship event, the Lucille Hart Dinner, after claiming Hart was not a lesbian, but rather a preoperative transsexual.



PHOTO BY PETRANELLA VESMA

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Roni Lang with former chief Tom Potter