

local news

What she did for love

Julie Davis has fought the good fight at the front lines for five years, and now she's tired

by Inga Sorensen

One of Oregon's most visible gay and lesbian rights advocates is leaving her job to make room for "fresh, new leadership."

Julie Davis, director of Basic Rights Oregon, the successor organization to the No on 13 campaign, will officially step down from her post Dec. 31.

"I'm as hopeful and optimistic as I was when I first began all of this, but I have to admit I'm tired," says the 38-year-old Davis. "I think it's healthy to know when to move on. I'm ready for more balance in my life."

For more than five years, Davis has been ensconced in electoral politics. In the early 1990s, she was bitten by the political junkie bug while volunteering for then gubernatorial candidate Barbara Roberts' campaign. (Davis was working in retail at the time.)

"Julie was a natural," says friend, author and veteran campaigner Thalia Zepatos, who was charged with running Roberts' Portland campaign operation. "She was a volunteer who had a keen interest in the campaign and an aptitude for learning... I think it's unusual for someone to reach that level of skill in such a short time."

Zepatos, 41, a strong ally of the sexual minorities community, soon became Davis' mentor, showing her the ins and outs of politicking.

"A few years back there did not seem to be many people in the gay and lesbian community who were experienced campaign managers," says Zepatos, co-author of the 1995 how-to book *A Grassroots Guide to Activism and Politics*.

Indeed. In 1988, the Oregon Citizens Alliance caught many off guard when it persuaded voters to repeal a gubernatorial executive order prohibiting sexual orientation bias in state government.

Sensing there would likely be a sustained legislative assault on the rights of gay and lesbian Oregonians, Zepatos took Davis under her wing and helped develop her campaign and leadership skills.

Davis utilized those newfound abilities in 1992 when she became the campaign manager for Oregon's first openly gay lawmaker, state Rep. Gail Shibley (D-Portland). Shibley went on to win by a landslide.

During that same election, the OCA's aggressively anti-gay Ballot Measure 9 failed. Undeterred, the group quickly announced plans to pass a series of local anti-gay and -lesbian rights initiatives, prompting the formation of Support Our Communities Political Action Committee (SOC-PAC), which provided financial and political sup-

port to local communities facing OCA initiatives. Davis eventually became SOC-PAC's director.

"Julie is a coalition builder and had a vision that went beyond election night," says Corvallis resident Merry Demarest, who was a SOC-PAC steering committee member. "Many people came out of the No on 9 campaign bruised and mistrustful. Julie and SOC-PAC attempted to rebuild relationships and reach out to those who had not previously been approached."

SOC-PAC would soon transform into the No on 13 campaign—with Davis as director—as the result of the OCA's 1994 statewide campaign to pass Measure 13, a watered-down version of

Unlike earlier incarnations, Basic Rights Oregon, which Davis directed from the start, was created as a long-term, permanent and more proactive organization.

For much of 1995-96 the group geared up electorally for another statewide anti-gay rights initiative. This time, however, the OCA failed even to place such a measure on the ballot.

"One of the things that really stands out in my mind about Julie is that when we would discuss strategies to defeat discrimination, she wanted to make sure that what we did not do anything to damage the integrity of the gay and lesbian rights movement," says Demarest, 47, who also served on

closeted," she says. "Maybe it would work, but at what cost? We had a very frank discussion about that and decided that we were not going to use our precious polling dollars to even ask that question."

During her tenure with Basic Rights Oregon, Davis has raised and sustained voter and donor contacts, and has helped produce the Fair Workplace Project, whose centerpiece is an educational video highlighting the often-unknown truths about workplace discrimination experienced by lesbians and gay men and their lack of legal protections.

Davis has spent several months generating contacts within the corporate community, and the video has been viewed at several companies.

"I think of myself more as a liaison than a leader," says Davis, reflecting on her political résumé. "Back during SOC-PAC and No on 13, I think I was the right person at the right time. We needed someone then who didn't have any perceived baggage. I had been working on Gail's campaign and had not been directly involved in No on 9, but I watched and learned."

Davis says she promoted a "different philosophy," one that was more open and "communicated outward."

"I think that philosophy helped us," she says, adding she hopes to remain professionally involved in gay and lesbian rights issues. "It's what I love."

As for Basic Rights Oregon, Davis says she'll lend what support she can to the group, many of whose members met in mid-November to discuss the organization's future.

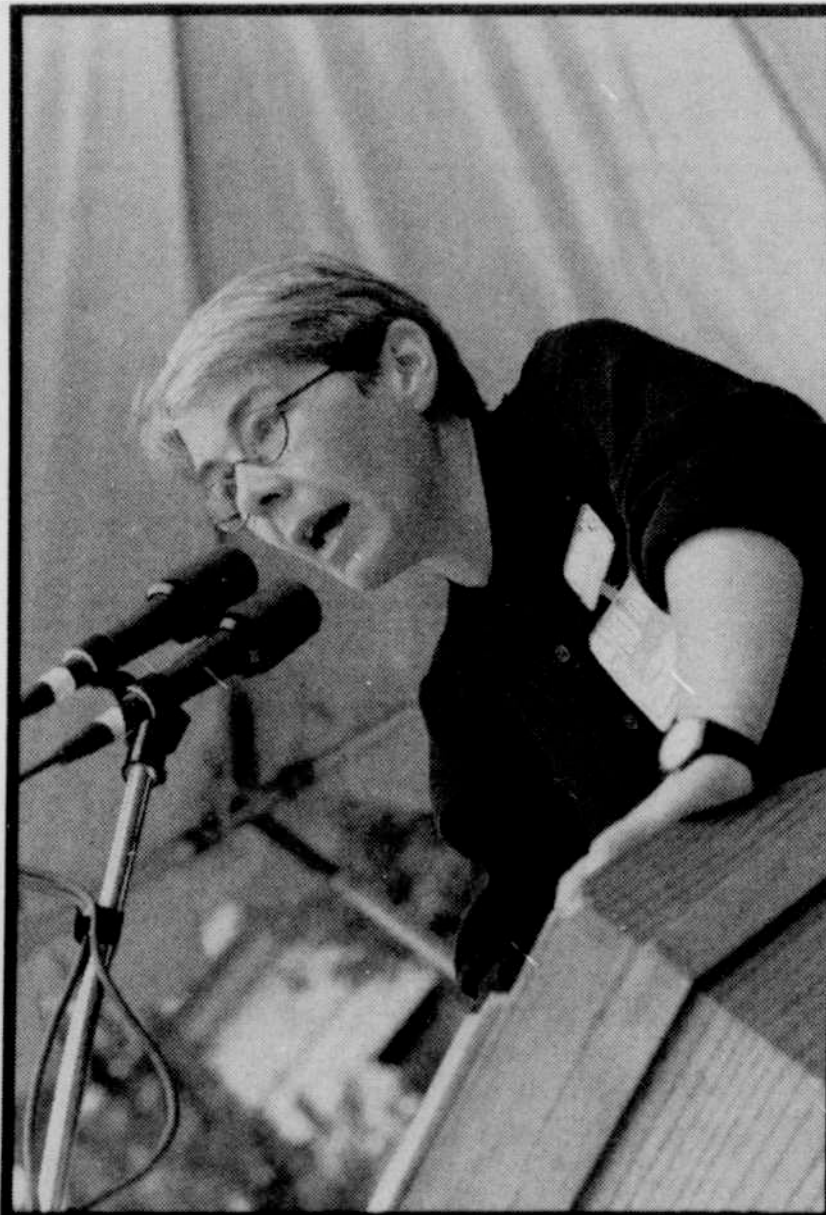
"We got together and decided it was important we retain the strengths of the organization, which is its electoral thrust," says Davis. "That includes things like making sure we maintain and update our in-house voter file—and build upon it—in case we are faced with another initiative. We also have to continue to play a role in changing the [gay rights] debate in Oregon through, for example, the Fair Workplace Project."

She adds, "But I think we have to take it farther and come up with a five-year plan. It's easy to say we want to do this or that or the other thing. I think we need to put a price tag on each goal and then set about to raise the money."

But that will be up to someone else. For her part, come January, Davis plans to "head for a warm beach somewhere."

She's also in a "fabulous new relationship" with Portland attorney Kathryn Stebner, and Davis says they plan to move to San Francisco in early spring.

"It will definitely be a big change for me, but I'm looking forward to it," she says.



Julie Davis

Measure 9.

Like its predecessor, Measure 13 got on the ballot, but was defeated at the polls.

No on 13 eventually shifted into Basic Rights Oregon, whose purpose was to fight discriminatory measures, including those brought by the OCA.

the boards of No on 13 and Basic Rights Oregon.

For example, she says, there was discussion during No on 13 about focusing on a privacy rights strategy.

"In essence it would have been pushing the notion that it was OK to be gay if you were

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