

Nelson loses

Washington high court deals another blow to the right of journalists to political activism on personal time

by Inga Sorensen

The Washington state Supreme Court has ruled that a newspaper may prohibit political activism by its reporters to protect its credibility.

The Feb. 20 ruling stems from a years-long battle involving Sandy Nelson, a journalist who was reassigned to a nonreporting position after campaigning for a lesbian and gay rights measure.

In its decision, the court held that a state law protecting employees from discrimination on the basis of their political activities does not apply to newspapers.

Justice Richard Sanders wrote, in part: "Editorial integrity and credibility are core objectives of editorial control and thus merit protection under the free press clauses."

Nelson, you may recall, was removed from her reporting position in 1990 by her editors at the *News Tribune*, a Tacoma daily, because she was actively involved in political causes, specifically sexual minority rights. She was transferred to the copy desk, a job she previously told *Just Out* she "absolutely deplores."

Nelson, an award-winning education reporter, began working for the *News Tribune* in 1983. At that time, newsroom employees were represented by the Pacific Northwest Newspaper Guild Local 82, and their contract included a clause that protected workers from retribution for their off-duty activities.

Nelson was involved in many community causes. She was active in the socialist-feminist movement and had been a longtime member of Radical Women, an organization dedicated to women's full equality. She defended abortion clinics and Native American treaty rights.

In 1986, a California corporation, McClatchy Inc., purchased the *News Tribune*, abrogated its union contracts and forced workers to reapply for their jobs.

The new management rehired Nelson, knowing she was a local political activist. The following year the new owners proposed a "code of ethics" for newsroom workers that included a blanket prohibition against all off-duty political activity on the grounds that such a prohibition was

needed to ensure that the paper protected its "appearance of neutrality."

Nelson, other reporters and their union denounced the proposal as a violation of newsroom workers' rights to free speech and association, saying management had committed an unfair labor practice by unilaterally imposing an unratified ethics code—one that interfered with the political and personal rights of newsroom employees.

Nelson remained active in human rights causes, and in 1989 helped form the Committee to Protect Tacoma Human Rights, which sought to stop the repeal of a Tacoma law barring discrimination based on sexual orientation.

When the law was rescinded by voters, Nelson was among the gay and lesbian rights supporters who launched an initiative campaign to get the law back on the books.

She continued to receive excellent ratings from her employer until 1990, when she was involuntarily transferred to a night copy desk job by management.

Even though her political activism never overlapped with her work as an education reporter, she was told she must discontinue all political activities in order to work as a reporter.

Nelson refused and filed a lawsuit against the *News Tribune* in 1993, claiming the newspaper violated the Fair Campaign Practices Act, a 1992 law that prohibits employers from discriminating against workers for "in any way supporting or opposing a candidate, ballot proposition, political party or political committee."

Last year a judge dismissed the claim on grounds that the First Amendment allows newspapers to control the content of their publications.

Five members of the high court agreed, while two dissented, saying the newspaper cannot claim immunity from the Fair Campaign Practices Act.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington backed Nelson's case and considered it to be a groundbreaking case for the political rights of Washington workers.

Nelson expressed disappointment with the outcome, and will ask the high court to reconsider its decision. She says she's willing to take the case to the U.S. Supreme Court if need be.



PHOTO BY CHRISTY PORTER

Sandy Nelson

Multicultural center opens at PSU

An open house for Building Bridges, Portland State University's new multicultural resource center and lending library, will be held March 7 from 3 to 7 pm.

The center, located at PSU's Sixth Avenue Building, offers a lending library of geographical and topical artifacts, and educational materials including videotapes and books for children and adults. The materials represent the combined resources of the Multicultural Resource Center, Oregon Peace Institute, World Affairs Council, Oregon International Council, and PSU's Middle East Studies Center and Institute of Asian Studies.

For more information, call PSU's Office of International Affairs at 725-5859.

Bisexual group blasts Willamette Week

Angered over a personals advertisement policy it calls discriminatory, the Portland Bisexual Alliance protested a Valentine's Day dance sponsored by *Willamette Week*.

PBA is unhappy that the weekly newspaper's policy calls for bisexuals' personals to be placed under the category "Other," regardless of where they would like their ads to run.

The demonstration was held during *Willamette Week*'s "Cupid, Culture & Cocktails Bash" on Feb. 14 at the Portland Art Museum's North Wing.

Compiled by Inga Sorensen



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Prayers for Bobby

Portland Gay Men's Chorus
with soprano soloist Margie Boule

Portland

March 21 • 8:00 p.m.

March 23 • 7:00 p.m.

First United Methodist Church

Vancouver

March 22 • 8:00 p.m.

State School for the Deaf

Tickets to the performance, which chronicles the life and death of a Portland-area gay youth through his diaries, can be purchased at: Gay Pied (Northwest Broadway), A Gentle Strength Bookstore (Vancouver, WA), and Jelly Beans (SW 10th) or call (503) 699-8586.





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