

# Focusing in

*Sherry Harris wants to put her energy and experience to work for Seattle*

by Inga Sorensen

**S**herry Harris has learned some tough lessons.

"That's true, but I always try to grow from my experiences," says the affable Harris, a candidate for Seattle City Council.

Harris, you may remember, made history when she became the nation's first out African American lesbian elected to public office. The year was 1991. The office? Well, Seattle City Council.

Despite her progressive political stance—which, relatively speaking, is still tagged as a plus in the Emerald City—Harris lost her 1995 re-election bid.

"Losing an election is not a negative thing," reflects Harris, who nonetheless acknowledges that the sting of a loss can hurt pretty badly.

"One of the major lessons I walked away with is that you really must stay focused and not spread yourself too thin," says Harris, now 40. "I was working full time. I was promoting a housing levy, and I was a candidate. You can't do all three things well. The second thing I learned is that in politics you have to publicly talk about your successes. I'm not a show horse; it doesn't come naturally to me. But the fact is you can do all sorts of great things, but unless you talk about them people aren't going to know it. When you're running for public office, that's a detriment."

During her four years on the Seattle City Council, Harris chaired the Education and Housing committees, co-chaired the Joint Committee on Education, and served as a representative on the Families and Education Levy Oversight Committee.

Harris helped orchestrate the successful 1995 Housing Levy campaign, which she says will lead to the building of 120 housing units for the working poor and disabled, in addition to allowing low-income senior citizens to keep their homes in good repair.

"I grew up living in public housing in Newark, New Jersey. It was nothing like the public housing we build in Seattle today," says Harris, who moved to that city in 1978 to work as an engineer for Boeing. "Those housing projects put hundreds of families in one building, then clustered the buildings together in large campuses. The failures I saw in this approach led me to work as an activist for integrated, affordable housing in neighborhoods."

Harris also traveled extensively speaking out for gay and lesbian rights. She became a familiar face in Oregon during the No on 9 campaign, especially after appearing at a rally that drew 10,000 people to Pioneer Courthouse Square in October 1992. Flanked by other local and national activists, Harris ripped the OCA for its discriminatory tactics.

And she says her Oregon experiences left an indelible imprint on her.

"One of the things I have been doing over the past year or so is writing a book about the lesbian and gay community with a focus on the gay black community," Harris tells *Just Out*.

"The impetus came from the No on 9 campaign. At that time we were touring [throughout the Pacific Northwest] working the black churches and getting beaten up left and right. Despite that, gay people would cling to the church no matter how anti-gay the minister," she explains. "It got me wondering about the gay African American community. This book is essentially a collection of thoughts and reflections about that community as it exists today."

Harris says she does not yet have a publisher, and probably won't pursue the book project while she's campaigning.

"I made that mistake before," she laughs, referring to spreading herself too thin.

She will, however, remain actively involved with the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, a national organization that works to empower black lesbians and gay men by developing their leadership skills, increasing their visibility and building bridges among various communities.

The group recently established a regional structure to better represent all parts of the country, and Harris was selected as the Pacific Northwest's regional representative. In the role, she will work closely with other lesbians and gay men in Oregon and Washington.

She is also a member of the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum's 10-woman, five-man board of directors.

As for politicking, Harris says she plans to hold an official campaign kick-off party come May or June. She hopes to raise \$200,000—\$40,000 more than last time.

"That's my budget," she says. "Unfortunately, it takes that much to run a campaign these days."

Harris lost her 1995 re-election bid to now-former Councilman John Manning, who resigned late last year from the \$75,505-a-year post to defend himself against assault and burglary charges.

In January, she joined 101 other candidates who vied for the vacant seat. Each made a three-minute presentation to the Seattle City Council about why she or he was best for the job. Harris, along with retired Seattle Fire Chief Claude Harris, was among those who didn't make the cut.

With other council seats opening up down the road, however, Harris is undeterred.

"I feel like this is God's calling," she says.

For more information, contact the Citizens for Sherry Harris Committee, PO Box 2513, Seattle, WA 98111, (206) 522-9393, or e-mail Sherry1997@aol.com.



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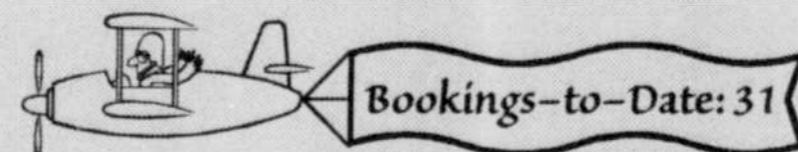
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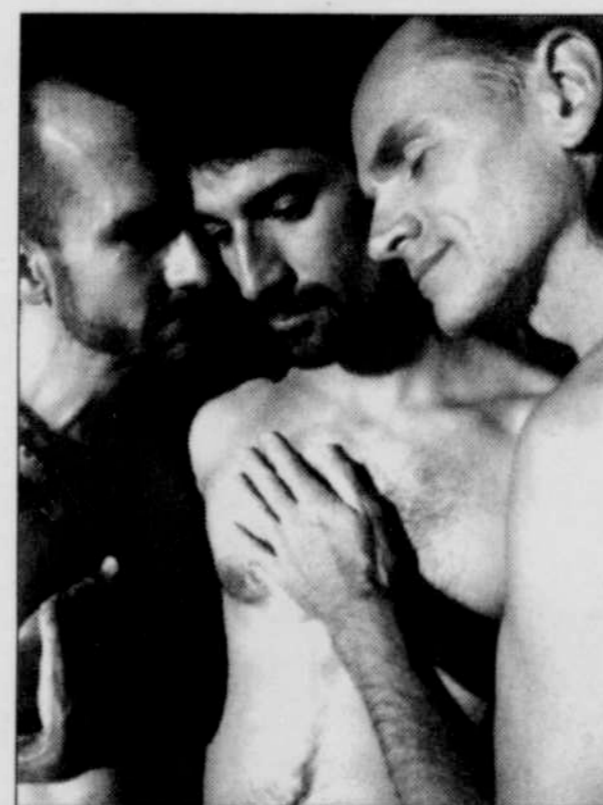
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