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local news

Taking the bi road

Author, educator and out bisexual Lani Ka'ahumanu brings her wit and wisdom to Portland

by Will O'Bryan

In the past few years bisexuality as a movement has gained momentum. Arguably, as a founding member of BiPol, the country's first bisexual political action group, the mother of this modern movement may be Lani Ka'ahumanu.

Ka'ahumanu left the San Francisco suburbs, the PTA and Little League in the mid-'70s to start down a path that finds her in Portland on May 9 speaking at Portland State University as a guest of PSU's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Alliance. The topic will be "Beyond Binary: The Other Side of Other." The topic, as Ka'ahumanu defines it, refers to bisexuals being difficult to categorize, even in the queer community and sometimes especially in the queer community.

Lonnie Renteria, LGBA coordinator, says Ka'ahumanu's visit is particularly appropriate for an academic setting, explaining that as a writer and editor Ka'ahumanu is paving the road for the study of bisexuality within the broader field of queer studies. She co-edited *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexuals Speak Out* with Loraine Hutchins, and her writing has appeared in the *Advocate*, *Utne Reader*, *Libido* and numerous anthologies. Much of LGBA's interest stems, Renteria says, from Ka'ahumanu's history of challenging academics and their notions of bisexuality, as well as her aptitude at chronicling a sexual, political movement.

This will be Ka'ahumanu's first trip to Portland as a lecturer. "I've never been [to Portland] with this hat on," Ka'ahumanu says, adding that she'll also have her literary cap on as she follows the lecture with a book reading and signing at Laughing Horse Books, sponsored by the Portland Bisexual Alliance. Not one for conventions, Ka'ahumanu's reading list for Friday evening has not been confirmed. And what will she be signing? Likely anything she's handed.

PBA president and chair Adam Wills believes that Ka'ahumanu's visit will lend support to Portland's bisexual community. "We're very excited that she's coming," Wills says, comparing Ka'ahumanu's stature within the bisexual community to that of Urvashi Vaid, director of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and author of *Virtual Equality*, within the lesbian and gay community. "She's a big name."

Ka'ahumanu generally lectures throughout the

spring, to mark Pride events, and the fall, to mark the coming out season. Portland will wind up her spring tour, which has already brought her to Rutgers University, Bryn Mawr, the University of Pennsylvania and other campuses. While traveling through Oregon this season, she'll also be making stops at the University of Oregon and Oregon State University.

Speaking to students about bisexuality is commonplace for Ka'ahumanu these days. She attributes the increase of youth interest in bisexuality to organizing on the national level. "It broke our isolation," Ka'ahumanu says, recalling her first meeting with members of bisexual groups

from across the country in Washington, D.C. Apparently she tapped into a momentum that she not only fostered, but helped to unleash. "We've [bisexuals] reached critical mass," she says, explaining that there is a domino effect, in that "visibility gives more permission."

While Ka'ahumanu is also recognized as an HIV activist and feminist, her Portland visit will likely concentrate on bisexual issues. "In a perfect world we would not lock ourselves in a category box," Ka'ahumanu says, conceding, "but we don't live in a perfect world."

Ka'ahumanu will be in Orlando in June for a convention held by members of BiNet USA, a national bisexual network she helped form, as national coordinator emeritus. Her fall season, as it stands, will take her to Maine, Vermont, New York and Michigan.

Considering Ka'ahumanu's lengthy list of accomplishments and public profile in the queer community—she was honored in the 22nd anniversary issue of *Ms.* magazine, "50 Ways to Be a Feminist"—her Portland visit is sure to be lively. And Ka'ahumanu guarantees, "It'll be fun."

Renteria shares that expectation: "She's very personable [and] funny as all hell."

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Lani Ka'ahumanu will speak at PSU on Friday, May 9, from 3 to 5 pm in Room 296 of Smith Memorial Center. The event is free and open to the public; call 725-5681 for more information.

Later that evening, from 7 to 9 pm, Ka'ahumanu will speak and sign autographs at Laughing Horse Books, 3625 SE Division St. Call 232-9275 with questions regarding that event.



Lani Ka'ahumanu

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