

LOWERY'S BOWER

Memories of a beloved civil rights activist will bloom in a fitting Rose City memorial by Amanda Burden

When Keeston Lowery flew into a room, friends say it was as though a wheelbarrow of fragrant flowers whisked in with him.

Lowery was adored by many who came in contact with him—as evidenced by the appearance five years ago of 700 people at his Washington Park memorial service, attended by then-Gov. Barbara Roberts, former Gov. Neil Goldschmidt and Portland Mayor Vera Katz.

Though Lowery died from AIDS complications half a decade ago, fond memories of the man continue to flourish within many who knew him.

Mary Volm, who worked with Lowery at Portland City Hall and gardened with him outside the office, says, "He had a profound influence on people; so many loved him. I think of him every day."

Before Lowery died, Volm told the avid gardener she planned to establish a topiary at Portland's City Hall in his honor. Lowery just laughed.

"You had to know him, he was an amazing person and he had a wonderful laugh," she remembers.

Volm never forgot her promise and worked to establish the garden after Lowery died.

On May 1, a handful of city officials and friends gathered to kick off the project by planting several shrubs and flowers in the proposed spot.

The Meditation Garden will encompass a 50-by-40-foot area in the City Hall courtyard at Southwest Fourth Avenue and Jefferson Street. The plot will brim with perennials—Lowery's favorite—and pathways, a bench and a watering system.

Volm hopes to raise \$3,000 to \$4,000 for the effort, which isn't slated to be finished until September. Some of Lowery's own plants will grow in the public garden.

"He told me you want to create mystery in the garden. You want to have paths that wind around," Volm says. "When you reach the end you can look back and see the whole garden."

Lowery was employed by the city for 10 years, after coming from a physical therapy background. Primarily, he worked as an aide to Mike Lindberg, then a city commissioner.

"[Lowery] was the most remarkable political person; he could raise money, he was sincere, honest and accepted," Volm recalls.

Lowery is perhaps best known for being the force behind a city ordinance that bars discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Six years ago when Lowery began campaigning for the initiative, with Lindberg and Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury as sponsors, the political climate was much different than it is today. Supporters of the Oregon Citizens Alliance's anti-gay measures 9 and 13 were drumming up support. Lowery was considered by many to be a trailblazer who took a great deal of heat for helping to craft the ordinance and rallying votes to shepherd the law through.

"I remember the day [the ordinance passed]. It was during the Lon Mabon era, and we knew [the vote] would be unanimous," says Volm. (Mabon is the longtime head of the OCA.)

"When [Lowery] flew into the hearing room he was full of hugs and kisses," continues Volm.

"In that room, he turned to Lon, flew his arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. The look on Lon's face was priceless."

Others who worked with Lowery remember the Mississippi-born activist's unparalleled grin.

"I loved him," says Madelyn Wessel, Portland's chief deputy city attorney. "I mourn him every day. He was this effective, zany, brilliant tactician and strategist who got things done."

She adds, "He was an incredible warm blast of goodness."

Wessel notes the city's anti-discrimination law would not be in effect without Lowery's efforts. She says he also helped write the city's employee benefits policy for domestic partners, which was approved last year.

Lowery, who was 45 when he died, was a key player in securing money to build the Friendly



Vera Katz and Mike Lindberg lend a hand

House Community Center in Northwest Portland. He managed to pull together a coalition to nab transportation funds for the project. Among other features, the center offers after-school programs and services for the elderly and the financially disadvantaged.

"This was a classic Keeston thing to do," says Wessel.

In addition, he served as Lindberg's liaison to the city water bureau, working on environmental and water policies.

Water bureau director Mike Rosenberger says, "[Lowery] was willing to take on controversial issues—big or little—and he looked at them in a perspective of fairness and equity and doing the right thing. He was willing to try to get problems resolved and had an incredible way with people."

He adds, "You felt good just being around him."

■ Contributions to the MEDITATION GARDEN can be sent to Mary Volm, c/o Office of Transportation, 1120 S.E. Fifth Ave., Room 702, Portland, OR 97204.



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