

ELECTION '98

As in life, there were ups and downs

by Inga Sorensen

And then there was one. When the Oregon Legislature opens for business come January, it appears a singular sexual minority lawmaker—state Sen. Kate Brown, a Portland Democrat who has publicly identified as bisexual—will be among the 90 legislators serving in Salem.

Many gay and lesbian rights activists were cautiously optimistic that openly lesbian candidate Elli Work, a Bend Democrat vying for the House District 54 seat, would join Brown, whose seat was not up for grabs during the Nov. 3 election.

However, as *Just Out* went to press, it looked like Work would lose her bid to Republican Tim Knopp.

The day after the election, Work's campaign manager, Cliff Cook, said of the predicted disappointment, "We're surprised. We were consistently getting good numbers.... We let our hopes get away from us."

Cook in part attributes the outcome to the almighty dollar.

"I bet [Knopp] outspent us 2-to-1. We weren't able to get on television as early as Tim did," he explains. "It was the same with our mailings."

Cook also says registered Republicans outnumber registered Democrats by roughly 2,000 in the district, which includes Deschutes County.

"Given all of that, we did what we could," he assesses. "In fact, I don't know if we could have done anything differently."

Cook says, at least at this time, Work has no plans to for run for public office in the future.

During the last legislative session two years ago, there were four openly gay, lesbian and bisexual state legislators: Democratic Reps. George Eighmey and Cynthia Wooten, both of whom were restricted from running again due to term limits; Republican Rep. Chuck Carpenter, who lost in the May primary; and Brown.

Jean Harris is the executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide grass-roots group that promotes queer rights. BRO backed a handful of state legislative candidates, including Work, by providing money and volunteers.

Harris says during the campaign, BRO connected with an estimated 130,000 voters, roughly half of whom the organization has deemed friendly to its causes.

With another anti-gay initiative poised for the year 2000 ballot, that could mean BRO potentially has an additional 65,000 new supporters to turn to for votes and money.

"So not only were we trying to get a particular candidate elected, we were also building [BRO's] base," she says.

As for the balance of power in the state Legislature, it appears Republicans will maintain control of both the Senate and the House by relatively slim margins. That reality will likely translate into another defeat for a statewide gay rights bill, as well as some feisty battles over anti-gay legislation.

On the national scene, history was made when Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat, became the first nonincumbent, out gay candidate elected to Congress. In addition, openly gay U.S. Reps. Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat, and Jim Kolbe, an Arizona Republican, were re-elected.

Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, says: "Tammy Baldwin ran a terrific campaign and will bring vision, integrity and energy to our issues. With the re-election of Barney Frank and Jim Kolbe, we are better represented than ever before."

Two other openly lesbian Democrats sought U.S. House seats. Grethe Cammermeyer, a former Army colonel, was defeated by Republican Rep. Jack Metcalf in Washington state, and Christine Kehoe lost to GOP Rep. Brian Bilbray in a California race.

Voters in two Maine cities cast ballots on local gay and lesbian rights measures. In South Portland, they approved a proposal banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, public accommodations or the extension of credit, but in Ogunquit, voters rejected a similar measure by nine votes out of a total 757 cast.

Voters in Fayetteville, Ark., and Fort Collins, Colo., also defeated gay-related anti-discrimination initiatives.

The gay and lesbian community also took a

couple of tough—though not unexpected—hits in Hawaii and Alaska.

In Hawaii by a 2-to-1 margin, voters approved a measure allowing state lawmakers to craft legislation prohibiting same-sex couples from legally marrying.

The proposal was designed to circumvent a 1993 court ruling that concluded Hawaii's refusal to recognize same-sex marriages was unconstitutional unless the state could show a compelling reason for not allowing same-sex couples to marry.

In a 1996 decision, Hawaii Circuit Judge Kevin Chang found the state could offer no good reason for its discrimination but stayed his decision while the state appealed to Hawaii's highest court. A decision is pending.

In response to the proceedings, more than two dozen states have barred same-sex marriages,

Court judge's ruling in favor of two gay men who challenged the state ban on same-sex marriage. The judge said choosing a life partner was a fundamental right and the state had to prove a compelling reason to regulate it.

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund representatives say they are "disappointed but not defeated" by the Hawaii and Alaska votes.

"Although a disappointment and setback that leaves more hurdles in our path, these votes do not stop our march to equality," says Lambda Marriage Project Director Evan Wolfson. "I have faith that the more the public hears about how discrimination hurts real-life lesbian and gay couples—people who commit to each other in sickness and in health, raise families, pay taxes, yet have no legal protections when medical and other emergencies arise—the more the public will support ending sex discrimination in civil marriage, and allow these couples to wed."

Dan Foley, a Honolulu attorney and co-counsel in the Hawaii marriage case, adds: "It is wrong that basic civil rights for a vulnerable minority

were put to a vote at all. This slices at the core of our democratic system and cuts a hole into Hawaii's constitution."

In other races closely watched by queer folks, U.S. Rep. Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, unseated Sen. Alfonse D'Amato in one of the most contentious campaigns in the country. The Human Rights Campaign, a Washington, D.C.-based gay political group, caused quite a stir when it endorsed D'Amato over Schumer.

In California, Sen. Barbara Boxer, a Democrat, beat challenger Matt Fong, who raised the ire of many in the sexual minorities community

when it was revealed he gave \$50,000 to Lou Sheldon's Traditional Values Coalition.

Also in California, former U.S. Rep. Robert Dornan, known for his extremely anti-gay bent, lost to incumbent Loretta Sanchez after a heated campaign.

"The defeat of Dornan, D'Amato, and Fong—a rabid right-wing politician, a staunch anti-choice politician who ran a very hostile campaign, and a supporter of the Traditional Values Coalition—may take some of the wind out of the sails of the right wing," says NGLTF's Kerry Lobel.



Jean Harris (right) and others get early results at elections headquarters in Portland

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

and Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which denies federal recognition of same-sex marriage and allows states to disregard same-sex unions licensed elsewhere.

The Hawaii ballot initiative amends the state constitution to empower the Legislature to reserve marriage to opposite-sex couples—which lawmakers will likely do.

Meanwhile, in Alaska voters opted 2-to-1 to amend the state constitution to limit the definition of marriage as only between one man and one woman.

The measure was in response to a Superior

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