

## SOLO SENATOR

**Just Out chats with Oregon's only out queer state lawmaker** by Holly Pruett

"I've been there," she reminds. "I know what it's like to be treated as a second-class citizen, to be denied the same benefits." She says last session's debate over the Employment Non-Discrimination Act felt very personal.

"There was a time when I was afraid of losing my job because of who I loved," Brown says.

Despite occasional isolation—Evelyn Mantilla of Connecticut is the only other openly bisexual state legislator Brown knows of—she has no regrets about coming out as an envelope-pushing, definition-defying bisexual legislator.

Brown, 38, is a trim, energetic blend of formidable and friendly. Earnest and personable, she is equally astute and tenacious.

Brown has given up her law practice, higher earnings and even her beloved horse for the "ability to make a difference."

Appointed to fill a legislative vacancy in 1992, Brown first had to defeat the incumbent who decided she wanted her seat back. Brown was re-elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1994, and in 1996 voters in her district sent her to the state Senate, where she's now entering the third year of her four-year term.

With her seat secure in the last election cycle, Brown was a tireless campaigner for her Democratic colleagues. The party reclaimed three seats in the Senate, making the prospect of a majority in 2000 attainable—a dramatic turnaround from 1997, when Republicans outnumbered Democrats 2 to 1.

Her good nature and hard work earned her the acclaim of her peers, who voted her in as leader of the "baker's dozen"—13 Democrats of the 30-member Senate.

With a bumper crop of social ultraconservatives in the House, the Senate is considered a "stable, moderating force," according to Brown.

"Overall the Legislature is more polarized. It will be difficult to work together on trickier issues," she says.

As a result, Brown predicts a no-frills session in which lawmakers will "get down to business, get the budget balanced, and get out of here."

While the Republicans control both legislative chambers, House Speaker Lynn Snodgrass and Senate President Brady Adams know that,

if allowed to erupt, the ideological rifts in their party could mean a return to the minority.

"They need to keep their members in control," Brown observes.

Adams in particular is expected to keep social issues bottled up in committee.

Even so, if social conservatives have their way, lawmakers may be forced to consider a referendum on the recent Oregon Court of Appeals ruling that bolsters domestic partnership benefits for same-sex couples and prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. If such a bill passed through the House and Senate, voters could negate the effects that historic judicial ruling.

While dramatic hearings on incendiary measures like the benefits issue would certainly get the queer community's attention, Brown cautions the real danger to the community may sit with the Ways and Means Committee.

The complex workings of the budget-setting committee are often "out of sight, out of mind," according to Brown. Yet it's the place where back-room deals may jeopardize funding for HIV prevention and treatment, teen health clinics and other critical community services.

"The queer community needs to be vigilant," echoes Barry Pack, former executive director of Right to Pride, who now works as Senate Democratic Caucus administrator.

Together, Brown and Pack will continue to carve out a queer presence in sometimes hostile territory.

"Knowing and working with someone on a daily basis who is queer brings dramatic and positive change," Pack asserts. "Just the fact that the two of us are in these leadership positions provides an opportunity for a lot of growth."

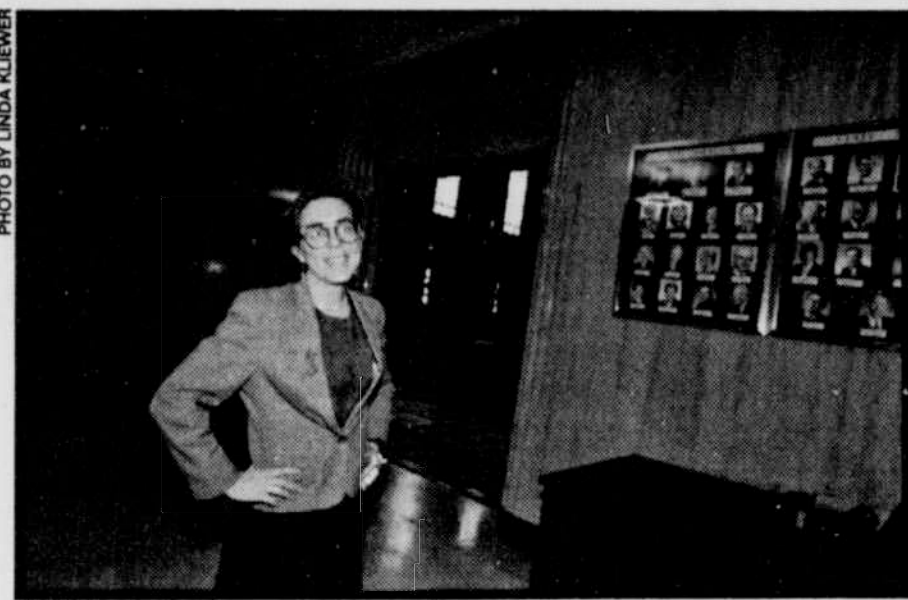
Still, Brown would like more company. "I'm going to miss George Eighmey and Chuck Carpenter," she says of her former queer colleagues.

"We need more voices in the Legislature," Brown concludes.

Her message to the queer community? "Get out there and get involved."

Her passion for participation even reaches across the aisle. "If you're a Republican, this is your wake-up call. Come out of the closet and get to work," she says.

The Senate Democratic leader recruiting Republicans? It just underscores Brown's basic premise of queer politics: "It's important to build friends everywhere."



Kate Brown

The 1990s have been an extraordinary decade for queer politics in Oregon. In 1995, just a few rainy months after the defeat of the Oregon Citizens Alliance's second attempt to codify discrimination in the state constitution, the Oregon Legislature convened with five openly queer members.

Now, four years later, the Legislature is again assembling in Salem. And our count of openly queer legislators is now...one-half?

"Some people say there are no queers in the Legislature," says openly bisexual state Sen. Kate Brown, a Portland Democrat. "I've been called a half-queer."

Brown is entering her fourth legislative session with a double distinction. She is the only remaining member of the once-thriving sexual minority caucus, thanks to term limits and bruising electoral battles.

At the same time, as Senate Democratic leader, Brown is the first queer legislator to be elected to a top leadership slot by her colleagues.

Despite the honor, she is the only sexual minority politico to be suspect of not being "a real queer," as she puts it.

Chalk it up to the usual bewilderment bisexuality prompts in both the gay and straight communities, amplified by Brown's marriage last fall to "soul mate" Dan Little.

Brown knows that "a lot of people see marriage as a heterosexual privilege that queers don't have access to." She says she understands the attitude of those who are troubled that her relationship with a man is now legally sanctioned in a way that her relationships with women could not be.

Like her politics, Brown's stance on her marriage comes from her heart. "I didn't marry Dan because he's a man," she asserts. "I married him because I loved him. He could just as easily have been a woman."

Brown's years of relationships with women give her a personal perspective on queer issues that is now unique in the Legislature.



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