

MEETING MR. MEISNER

Eugene's gay city councilor takes his roles as council president and father in stride by Tim Joyce

With plates full of warm chicken fajitas placed before them, Eugene city councilors were sounding off at a recent lunch-time meeting about a racial incident at a local mall.

"Eugene has an unsavory racial history," said Scott Meisner with a certainty in his voice. "It's an active history regarding discrimination. We need to break that pattern."

Halfway through his first term, he sits as a moderate on the Eugene City Council. Two of the eight council members are women, one man is Asian American, and 52-year-old Meisner is the first openly gay elected city official in Eugene's history.

In late January his council peers elected him their president, second in command behind the mayor. It was a unanimous vote of confidence in his abilities as a fair, competent leader.

Meisner's racially and economically diverse district covers a huge chunk of Eugene's geographic center. His small home is typical of others found in Eugene's oldest area. Just as easily as you can find baby strollers being pushed down tree-canopied streets near his house, you can find heroin dealers in the alleys.

"Eugene is a town where nobody wants anything to change, but they don't want to change their lives at all," says Meisner. He sits on the futon couch in his living room dressed in jeans and a sweater. "Get everybody else out of their cars, but I don't want to ride the bus," he laughs. "I call them hypocrisies...we certainly have our fair share of them here."

Meisner grew up in the rolling hills of the Midwest, but the civil rights movement pulled him south where he helped register black voters in Selma, Ala.

In 1971, he found himself in Eugene, where he became involved in gay rights and, later, AIDS issues.

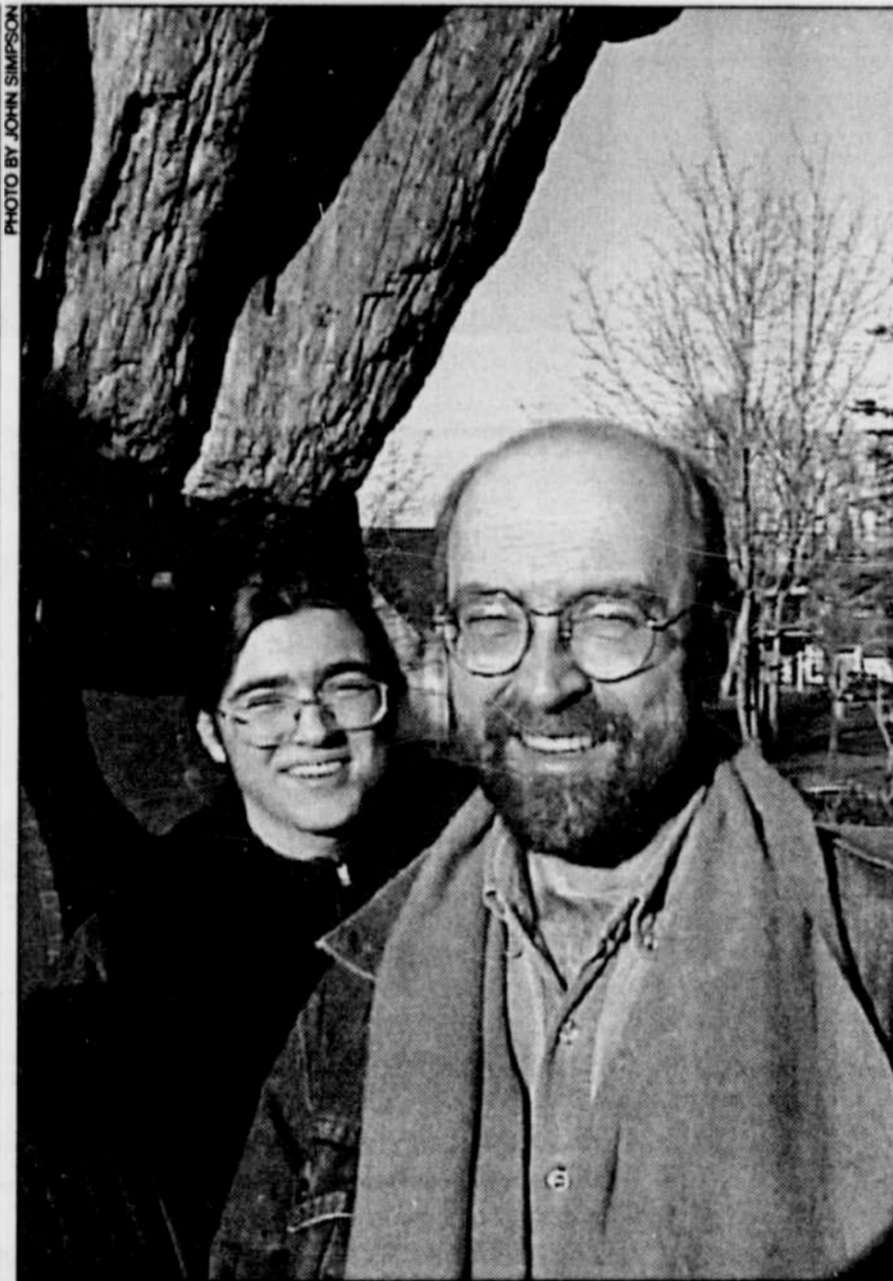
"Equal rights for everyone in every circumstance," Meisner says. "It's what drew me into being civically responsible and getting involved."

But Meisner advocates for more than gay and lesbian issues.

Shortly after he received a library sciences degree from the University of Oregon in 1974, he worked to get Lane County's library established. Budget cuts in the 1980s killed his project, but his passion never died. As a councilor, he pushed hard last November and helped convince voters to pay for a new four-story library. He says equal access to information is also a civil right.

"People might think the only thing he spends time on is the library," jokes Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey, "but he's a tireless worker on so many issues, with a strong background. We're lucky to have him on the council."

The pomp and circumstance surrounding the mayor's recent *State of the City* address was



Scott Meisner (right) with his son, Alexi

a family reunion of sorts for Meisner—although most wouldn't know it.

While he sat at the head table with the other councilors, a dark-haired teen-ager with a ponytail sat with two middle-aged women at a table near the front of the banquet room in the downtown hotel. The teen-ager casually scanned the table full of adults, while waiting for one of his mothers to get a community service award.

The 14-year-old is Alexi, the son Meisner fathered with a Eugene lesbian couple through artificial insemination.

"I never expected the opportunity to be a father," says Meisner. He's visibly proud of his son; his eyes light up when he describes Alexi as bright, curious and intelligent.

"He just passed me in height recently," Meisner admits, adding that his son is proud of his unique family. "In the seventh grade he did this incredible family tree project on his gay and lesbian family. His mothers both knew his middle school was in a more conservative area and asked him if he was sure he wanted to do this. He was absolutely convinced, he was real serious."

Alexi doesn't live with his biological father, but visits frequently. Meisner says they often make meals together or just talk.

When Meisner isn't busy answering phone calls from constituents, he works out of his home as a research lawyer.

"At this point it would be a good thing to have benefits," he says, "and paid sick days would simply be divine."

With his unpaid city council position taking up so much time, he says he has to live simply. He lives quietly with his cat, Max, in a three-bedroom home he bought years ago, when real estate was much cheaper. He does renovations and repairs himself. Living simply is a science he has down; he guesses the most he's ever made in a year is \$20,000.

Meisner says he's aware of his position as a role model for the gay and lesbian community, but says his sexuality really hasn't been an issue.

"The loss of privacy has been surprising," he laughs. "I'm still not accustomed to walking down the street and people who've never laid eyes on me greeting me by my first name and

knowing who I am. It's quirky."

Meisner is big on the livability of Eugene, particularly the arts. He is a huge advocate for the Eugene Symphony, the Eugene Ballet Company and the local opera.

The city of more than 120,000 is Oregon's second largest. With low crime and two gay bars, Meisner says, life here is tolerable. But the gay community seems split between college students and older, settled professionals. He says it's a shame so many gay men and lesbians in their 20s are blazing a new Oregon trail to bigger cities like Portland—places with larger gay populations and a livelier night life.

"Bend, Enterprise, La Grande, even Eugene. People don't always feel comfortable being gay where they're from. It's unfortunate gays buy into this idea that can only happen in a big city," he says.

Expect to see Meisner's name on the ballot in 2000 when he runs for a second term. But beyond that, he's not likely to move up the political ladder.

"I love the city of Eugene. I have no desire to live anywhere else," he says. "Would I like to run for Congress and have to live in Foggy Bottom [in Washington, D.C.]? Not a chance."

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