

Gwenn Baldwin moves through the crowd, taking in the world that is about to become hers.

Her dark hair, crisply shaped, frames the notable angles of her face. She offers the air of a Manhattan professional—stylish, directed, driven, paced. She's what you'd call "well put-together."

On this night, March 6, the Portlander is mingling among the 1,000-plus women who have turned out for the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center's 15th annual *Women's Night*, a swanky shindig that sucks in hundreds of thousands of dollars to bolster women's services at the center, including the Audre Lorde Lesbian Health Clinic, the city's first nonprofit health clinic specifically providing basic preventive gynecological care to lesbians and bisexual women.

In attendance at the sold-out gala are tennis legend Billie Jean King and Emmy Award-winning actress Anne Heche, both of whom are to be honored.

When King steps up to receive her Community Role Model Award, she tells the crowd: "My sexuality was probably the most difficult struggle I've had in my whole life, and the one thing it taught me was that until you find your own truth, you really cannot be free. Another thing I didn't do as a younger person was ask for help or support, even if I thought someone might be safe to talk to or trust. And that's what the [center] does...you help young people—and even us mature people—every day feel safer and supported."

Heche, who is featured in several major motion pictures including the remake of *Psycho*, *Donnie Brasco* and *Wag the Dog*, snags the Creative Integrity Award, which is presented by Gillian Anderson of *The X-Files* fame. Twice weekly for nearly a year, Heche, well-known for her intimate coupling with Ellen DeGeneres, has trekked to the center to work with sexual minority youth.

The mix at the flashy affair is impressive, but perhaps the biggest splash is made by Baldwin, who is unveiled as the incoming executive director of the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Community Center, a roughly \$28 million operation with a staff of nearly 300 and 10 times as many volunteers.

Founded 28 years ago by a small group of gay men and lesbians (with an initial \$35 in the bank), the awesome establishment—which actually stretches into five different physical locations peppered throughout the greater L.A. area—provides extensive HIV/AIDS services and myriad programs for queer people.

The center's four-story, 44,000-square-foot McDonald/Wright headquarters in Hollywood and its satellite offices draw more than 15,000 client visits every month.

In short, this horse and buggy is big, and the

BIG TIME FOR BALDWIN

Portlander lands heavenly job in the City of Angels, leading the world's largest queer community center by Inga Sorensen



Gwenn Baldwin

reins will be tossed to Baldwin come April, which is just fine with LuAnn Boylan, the center's co-chair. In fact, she says, it's better than fine—it's a beautiful fit.

"She's got presence," says Boylan when describing Baldwin, who served as the communications director for former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts from 1991 through 1994.

Boylan labors a tad when pressed to elaborate on the elements of presence, clearly no easy task.

OK, we'll take a stab: Presence is that certain something that emanates from an individual—a particular energy that spawns a nuanced shift in the atmosphere whenever that person is around.

Like fear, folks sense it. With Baldwin, Boylan feels it, and so do I.

And when you're about to become the head of what's billed as the largest gay and lesbian organization on the planet—in a fabled industry town dripping with celebs, hype and big money, no less—presence is a blessed asset.

Baldwin replaces Lorri Jean, who resigned her post in February after six years at the helm of the center.

Jean is credited with nearly tripling the organization's funding, dramatically expanding the center's health programs, including the creation of a lesbian health clinic and a youth HIV clinic, and tripling the number of visits to the center from 4,000 to more than 15,000 per month.

"People felt Lorri walked on water," notes Boylan.

Some people might buckle under Jean's bulging bag of achievements; Baldwin, it appears, won't be one of them.

"I think the first year we need to look at stabilization," she tells *Just Out* during a recent rendezvous at a Marsee Baking shop in downtown Portland.

With such fast, intense expansion, it's critical the support for such growth be shored up, says Baldwin, currently a management consultant with a solid background in fund-raising, nonprofit management, public policy and media relations.

Second year? Evaluate what you've got. Third? Maybe gear up to launch new initiatives.

Her answers pop out easily. When asked about the center's Internet site, Baldwin says she'd bring it to life, make it interactive. "So people can schedule appointments right online," the 38-year-old Leo suggests.

Is she a computer techie? "No, but I know what I like," she shoots back.

And what she really likes is the connection she feels with the center's committed board and staff. During the interviewing process—which was rigorous and multilayered—Baldwin says she experienced a "synergy" with the California crew.

"We clicked," she says, admitting such moments are gifts to savor.

As for the board and staff, Boylan says they were very impressed with Baldwin's forthrightness and confidence.

"Gwenn was in unfamiliar territory—in what can be considered a highly stressful situation—and she carried herself incredibly," Boylan explains.

It also didn't hurt, confesses Baldwin, that the center sniffed her out.

"I got a call from a headhunter," she says. "They flew me down to Los Angeles...."

"I wasn't nervous at all, in fact it was a very liberating feeling because I'm so satisfied with my life," she continues. "I love Oregon, my job, my relationship. This wasn't something I was actively looking for."

Yet after learning more about the center and the role it plays—not just in the City of Angels but nationally as well—Baldwin decided this was an opportunity not to be missed.

For the past four and a half years, Baldwin has been linked in life with Jean Harris, 54, whom she met in the mid-1990s while working with the No on 13 campaign to beat back an Oregon Citizens Alliance anti-gay initiative.

Baldwin was No on 13's communications director, and Harris, a seasoned political activist, was brought up from San Francisco to assist with field operations.

The dance began—with one major complication: Baldwin was married (to a man).

"Clearly something was going on inside of me," says Baldwin, who decided to keep herself open to exploring her feelings.

That would lead to a divorce from her husband, and a pairing with Harris—Baldwin's "one and only," the love of her life. Today, the couple share a home in Northeast Portland with their assortment of dogs and cats.

Born the second of four sisters, Baldwin grew up with her siblings and parents in Waite Hill, a village of about 500 residents 20 miles from Cleveland. (Her father, an old-school Republican, has been mayor of the enclave since 1965.)

The family has always been close, and Baldwin's coming out as a lesbian did not change that.

"They were wonderful," she says, though she admits the news came as somewhat of a surprise. "But once they saw how happy I was—and how in love Jean and I were—that made it easier."

As for how Baldwin's new job will impact Harris' work as the executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, the state's leading gay and lesbian rights organization, Harris answers: "We have no game plan at this point."

She adds, "Los Angeles isn't really that far by air.... It'll be hard, but I guess we'll be booking a lot of flights."

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