

VANCOUVER VICTOR

The city's first openly gay elected official gives back to his hometown

by Jonathan Kipp

You never quite know where serendipity might strike.

For one Vancouver, Wash., native, it happened in a most unexpected place: a bar along Portland's Stark Street. "It all started to gel for me," Jim Moeller says about that evening.

He was enjoying his comfortable suburban lifestyle, periodically venturing across the Columbia River to take part in Portland's night life. But it was the early '90s, and he started taking notice of an Oregon man in the news.

The man eventually would become a household name. Years later, Moeller tracks the serendipitous moment back to him.

The man? Lon Mabon.

Moeller made a decision that night in the smoke-filled drinking hole that would change his life. "I can't just live my life in this envelope and not participate," he recalls thinking to himself.

Moeller then got involved fighting off clones of Mabon's Oregon Citizens Alliance, with similar anti-gay agendas, in his own state. A few short years later, he was elected to the City Council—Vancouver's first openly gay elected official. He not only won the 1995 race, he defeated a key leader in the group Washington for Traditional Values, a sister organization to the OCA.

It is one thing to win, Moeller says. "But it feels good to kick right-wing butt all at the same time," he chuckles.

Last November, he was re-elected to his second term. "I have Lon Mabon to thank for my political career," he says.

Initially, Moeller was in over his head. "I listened more than I spoke," he says.

But he didn't let people see him sweat. The complexity of his job quickly became apparent, and he admits he didn't begin to understand those complexities for a year and a half. He says he survived his first term by aligning himself with people he trusted.

Despite being a novice public servant, he made headlines: "Moeller seeks benefits for gay domestic partners," "Councilman takes stand on gay rights," "Vancouver councilman introduces his life partner on Capitol steps." But he says he is not a one-issue candidate, which appeals to his constituents.

Now well into his second term, Moeller is focused on his community and making life in Vancouver better for its 137,000 residents. He says he is not a gay politician but a politician who happens to be gay.

Although he enjoys being a gay man who is in politics and doesn't avoid issues about equality for sexual minorities, it is not the focus of his political life. "I care more about all of the issues that make Vancouver a great place to live," says Moeller, an alcohol and drug counselor.

These days, being a gay man is almost an incidental fact, he explains. He says it used to bother him when the media insisted on including his sexual orientation in their stories. But not anymore.

"Who in the world doesn't know I'm gay?" Moeller, 42, asks with a smile. But he doesn't give the issue much thought any more.

He says being so public about his sexual orientation was frightening at times; some letters



Jim Moeller

to the editor were pretty nasty. But he was more concerned about his family members who still live in Vancouver than for himself. He says they suffered more than he did.

"My mom was beside herself—like any mother," Moeller says about the nastiness of some comments directed at him. But he was prepared.

"I'd grown up with those names my whole life," he explains. "Like a duck. Water off my back."

The councilman always has had a firm belief that issues of sexual orientation would be less and less important if people got to know him.

Moeller says he once got a call from a lady whose back yard was flooding. She needed some help from the city, so he went to her home to check out the situation. He is fairly certain his constituent didn't know he is gay.

But if she were to find out, Moeller thinks her reaction would be influenced by how he dealt with her problem: Did the problem get solved or not? "I personally believe that people's minds are changed about sexual orientation one person at a time," he says.

Moeller has the usual intelligence, sophistication and savvy to get elected and fit in. He plays the part of public servant well.

But he has a main-street, aw-shucks, let-me-buy-you-a-cup-of-coffee way about him that gives him great middle-class appeal. He's likeable and seems to be sincerely committed to Vancouver—a politician without obvious ambition.

One only can wonder where this guy might be headed; even if not by design, will Moeller continue in politics? "I like this stuff," he concedes.

But he seems uncomfortable considering himself a politician. "It's hard to say...a politician in training," he finally offers up as an alternative.

Moeller says he enjoys politics on the local level. Seeing things change, he says, is the fun part of municipal government.

"Because of your involvement with (the community), you see things built and organizations formed," he says. "It is really gratifying."

The job wasn't what Moeller expected, though. "It's completely different than what I thought it would be. It's a hell of a lot of work."

But he likes it like that. "It's surpassed what I thought it would be," he says.

Vancouver has a sense of community, and Moeller always has been there. It's where he grew up, where his family and friends are, where he works, where he shares a home with his partner—and where he works on his antique wooden boat out in the yard.

And it is a place where he wants to keep giving back. "My whole life is in this place," he says.

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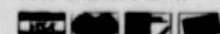
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