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NORTHWEST news

PEP TALK

Gwenn Baldwin rallies Portlanders to consider creating a community center by Jonathan Kipp

Portlanders rarely look to Los Angeles for advice, but this was a worthwhile exception. Some are wondering whether the community would support a gay and lesbian center, and they recently asked for some expert advice.

Gwenn Baldwin helped rally locals to support the concept when she spoke Oct. 9 to the Portland Area Business Association. She worked with some of Oregon's most well-known politicians before being lured to the City of Angels 18 months ago to serve as executive director of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center. She sat on Gov. John Kitzhaber's gay and lesbian advisory committee and served as communications director for former Gov. Barbara Roberts.

But what might have helped Baldwin land the high-profile job in Los Angeles was the important role she played in defeating 1994's anti-gay Measure 13. As communications director, she wrote award-winning editorials and opinion pieces.

Baldwin, who has a long history of giving advice and influencing people, was given 20 minutes to pique Portland's interest in a gay and lesbian center. If anyone could do it, this would be the person.

The Los Angeles center, about 30 years old, is the oldest gay and lesbian community center in the country. It is revered as a model for similar facilities throughout the country and the world.

The center started as a "safe place" for gays and lesbians to address issues of internal and external homophobia but recently underwent a substantial growth spurt. In 1992, the organization had a budget of only \$3 million.

Today, with an annual budget of \$33 million, it has five locations, 250 paid staff and more than 3,000 volunteers and attracts more than 220,000 people annually. Baldwin said the growth took "hard work, vision and a lot of generosity."

The centerpiece of the organization is "the Village"—an activity oasis located in the heart of Hollywood. "It's quite a place," Baldwin said.

She listed several factors required in creating a strong center like the one she directs. One of the most important: People are more likely to support a project with their money if the space has a feeling of permanency.

Baldwin said 106 community centers for sexual minorities are located in 36 states across the country. Only half of them have budgets and paid staff; less than a dozen have budgets exceeding \$500,000.

"Does Portland need it?" Baldwin asked the businesspeople. "Absolutely!" she enthusiastically answered her own question.

"It's a phenomenal place for a center," said Baldwin, who still considers Oregon her home.



Gwenn Baldwin

"It is a phenomenal place to live."

Baldwin said centers are located in Springfield, Mo., and Salt Lake City. "These are not easy places to have a center," she joked, "and they are doing great work."

Baldwin thinks what Portland needs in a center isn't necessarily what Los Angeles needs. Every city is different, she said.

To start, the community needs a few committed leaders. They then must bring to the planning table additional people with a vision of what the center could and should look like.

Portlanders need to look at current services and what they would like to offer to the community, Baldwin said. "You have to look at today's issues to be relevant to the people."

In Los Angeles, if the center only were to offer social services, Baldwin explained, "We'd be on a treadmill." Instead, it

"(Portland is) a phenomenal place for a center. It is a phenomenal place to live."
— Gwenn Baldwin

diversified and offered activities and advocacy services that are relevant to the Southern California community.

The Los Angeles center serves 2,300 patients for HIV services. An additional 2,000 patients are seen in the general health care program. Programs also serve homeless youth and senior citizens.

Vision is important, but a center requires substantial cash. Baldwin said one of the first steps is to find or cultivate what she calls "angels"—individuals to help with a capital campaign. Donors will be needed as well as others who have knowledge or connections in real estate.

"You have to create a community a step at a time," Baldwin said. "No community center is built in a day." □

For more information on the LOS ANGELES GAY & LESBIAN CENTER, visit the Internet site www.laglc.org.