

# HEROIC GESTURES

**Former governor addresses Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays** by Jonathan Kipp

Former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts says every human rights movement has heroes. She has come to admire the parents in the gay rights movement, some who even have become household names across the country. She refers to Dennis and Judy Shepard and Betty DeGeneres as heroes.

But no matter how many "celebrity" parents are out fighting for the rights of their kids and the gay community, Roberts says the quiet, day-to-day heroes are what the movement needs to be successful. "PFLAG is that," she says.



Barbara Roberts

Alliance helped Oregon get a jump-start in forming a statewide organization. "It is really exciting to see that energy here," he says.

But fighting OCA-sponsored ballot measures also has been a factor in PFLAG chapters losing momentum. Zenobia-Saffir says that work is important but has kept other projects from moving forward.

Roberts says PFLAG members and all Oregonians, although frustrated and tired from fighting the OCA for 12 years, are doing work every day that is helping the state move toward a day when the fight will be over. The

more people who see the gay and lesbian community on a regular basis, she believes, the harder it becomes for the OCA to have any validity.

"This is a movement they cannot stop," Roberts says. "You can't put the genie back in the bottle."

The almost perennial struggle at the ballot box over basic rights is demeaning for the gay and lesbian community, Roberts told *Just Out*. Not only that, it's disruptive to the state, expensive and time-consuming.

But Roberts remains optimistic. Almost 80 percent of U.S. citizens believe in the fair treatment of sexual minorities under the law, she says. She thinks the government should take a lead in making certain that fairness is delivered, whether it be through safe schools or hate crimes legislation or other protection.

Some Oregonians think you can't legislate morality, nonviolence and peace, Roberts explains. But she says government has done just that for centuries.

"A culture does begin to change by impact of its laws," says Roberts, adding that laws are a society's consciousness.

"As soon as you put a law on the books you say...we're reinforcing you."

And to those who disagree, like the OCA? Roberts says the message is different: "You're out of step with this country."

It is a struggle she thinks the gay community is winning with the help of PFLAG members. When parents and friends of the gay community step forward and clearly say that they support their gay children and friends, she says it makes a difference. In a social battlefield, "every inch you gain matters." □

For more information about PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS visit the Internet site [www.pflag.org/chapters/oregon.html](http://www.pflag.org/chapters/oregon.html).

Roberts addressed the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays statewide conference May 5 in Eugene. The almost 100 people who attended were moved by her remarks, organizers say.

PFLAG/Oregon president Donna Zenobia-Saffir says Roberts was inspirational and helped reinforce the work all chapters do. "She's so down to earth and believes so fervently in this work."

Oregon is one of only a handful of states that have a formal PFLAG state council, according to Ron Schlittler, West Coast field manager. Some think Oregon was the first to organize statewide.

Oregon has a strong grassroots organization, with PFLAG chapters throughout the state. That strength led to the formation of a statewide organization in 1996 to help chapters network with each other and build coalitions with other civil rights groups such as Basic Rights Oregon and the Rural Organizing Project. PFLAG/Oregon also aids local chapters in tackling bigger issues such as the Safe Schools Bill, which is awaiting a formal hearing in Salem.

But perhaps most importantly, the state organization helps recruit new members and provides crucial assistance in getting chapters started. Parents of gays and lesbians in small towns especially are lacking support, Zenobia-Saffir says.

Oregon has nine PFLAG chapters and seven towns with at least one contact person who fields calls. A new chapter is forming in Grants Pass, and "baby steps" are being taken in McMinnville toward a new group. Organizers estimate the state has between 250 and 300 members.

"We can do more than just bake cookies and give hugs," Zenobia-Saffir says. "We're powerful."

It was obvious that PFLAG needed to network more efficiently and not just be driven by Portland's chapter, the largest in the state with 120 members, Zenobia-Saffir says.

Schlittler thinks the Oregon Citizens

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