

MILITARY OFFENSIVE

School board votes to uphold ban on recruiters

by Jonathan Kipp

Although it took most of the night to come to a vote May 21, the Portland Public Schools board unanimously approved what many consider only a slight change to the district's ban on military recruiters.

The new policy will allow school personnel to speak openly and distribute literature to students about education and career opportunities in the military, which is not permitted under the ban. The change also requires officials to inform kids about the military's policy on homosexuals.

Schools will remain off-limits to military personnel, though, unless they are speaking to students about a nonrecruitment issue. Board members Doug Capps and Susan Hagmeier wrote the proposal as a compromise between ban supporters and those who want it lifted.

The ban was enacted in 1995 in response to the military's anti-gay "don't ask, don't tell" policy and the district's new policy eliminating discriminatory employers from the halls of Portland's public high schools.

The meeting twice was interrupted by a coalition of demonstrators, including the Education Crisis Team and ban supporters. Scores of protesters carried signs and chanted, "We're all fired up." The crisis team has been demonstrating against the school board for months, often interrupting the meetings.

The board has spent several months reconsidering the military ban. Some members were adamant about leaving the policy intact because, among other things, they had too many pressing issues to deal with, including diminishing funds.

Co-chair and ban author Marc Abrams led the fight to keep the matter from coming to a vote. He says the dis-

trict's own statistics indicate that the 10-year decline in recruitment actually slowed after the ban was in place and that recruitment has improved overall since then.

But others, including Derry Jackson and Ron Saxton, lobbied the board to overturn the ban. Jackson has been vocal for months about the need for inner city students to have access to more education and career opportunities.

Bonnie Tinker, Love Makes a Family executive director and one of Jackson's most vocal critics about the ban, affirmed her support for the crisis team's efforts during a 55-minute break in the meeting, when the board left the room because of the chaos. "We are with you, too," she said.

But after Jackson re-entered the room and started listening to the demonstrators, he and Tinker got embroiled in a yelling match when

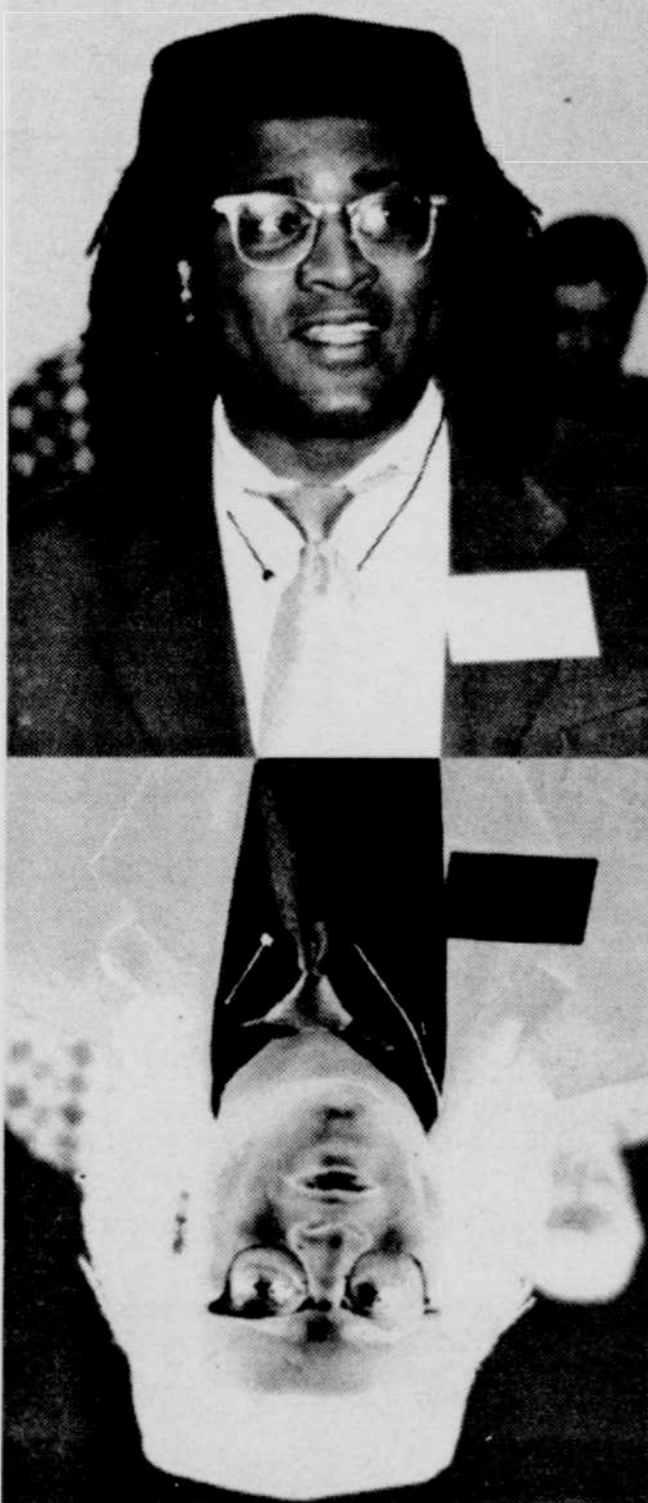
she put him on the spot about his position. She encouraged onlookers to take a stand against all discrimination, saying democracy has no chance otherwise.

Despite Tinker's call for unity, her words fell on at least some deaf ears; many African American citizens followed the lead of Bernie Foster, publisher of *The Skanner*, in opposing the ban. Most stood quietly during her plea for support.

Jackson was quick to disagree with Tinker. "That's not true," he said. "If you ever give us a chance to prove this..."

But before the debate continued, Jackson cut off the discussion, calling Tinker "rude." When another demonstrator confronted him about his campaign promise to leave the ban in place, he left the room, saying he wouldn't "tolerate rudeness."

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS



Board member Derry Jackson went AWOL after a yelling match became too hard to handle

Before the vote almost all of the board members acknowledged each other for their productive working relationships. Capps called the compromise "the board working at its best." He said the vote would allow members to move on to other priorities.

Jackson wasn't happy with the proposal. He reiterated that he "wants an equal playing field for everyone."

But he eventually relented: "I will hesitantly support because it does represent some improvements." Saxton, a Republican gubernatorial candidate and critic of the ban, called the vote "a positive step in the right direction."

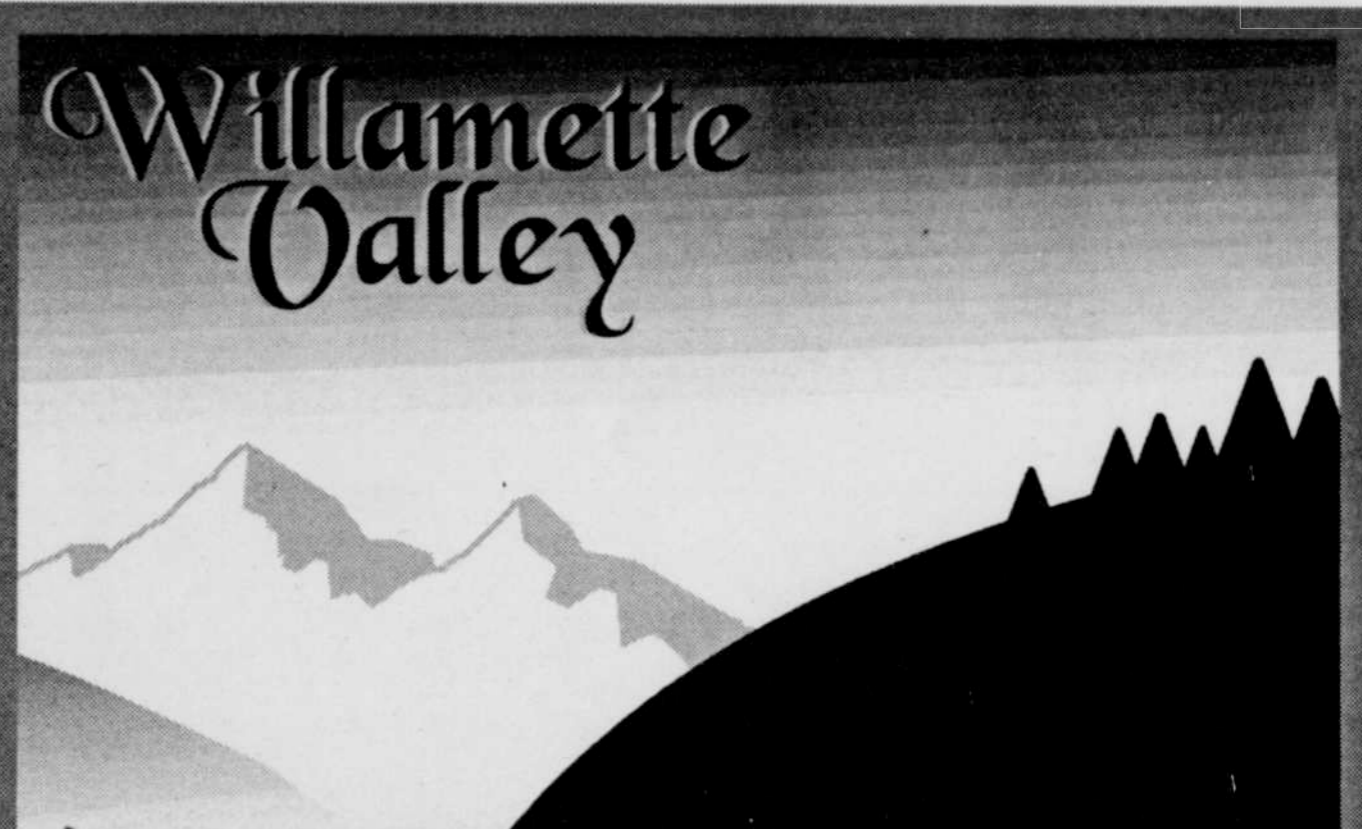
Afterward Abrams told *Just Out* the issue shouldn't come up again for many years. He considered the vote a victory.

Other ban supporters called it an unnecessary compromise and accused the board of giving in. Military recruiters obviously were disturbed by the compromise, many grimacing during the board's closing comments.

Whatever closure the vote brought to either side didn't last long, though. Not more than 24 hours after the meeting U.S. Reps. David Vitter, R-La., and Pete Sessions, R-Texas, attached an amendment to a bill in Washington, D.C., that would deny all federal funds to schools or districts that do not allow military recruiters on their campuses.

The motion passed by a 7-to-1 margin. Tens of millions of dollars for Portland's public schools could be at risk, Abrams said. □

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