

PEOPLE

For someone who's only 23, Gabby Hendel wields a great deal of power. With the flick of her wrist, she can stop traffic and bring the city to a screeching halt—literally.

You see, Hendel works for Multnomah County as a bridge operator. That means she spends hours perched atop Hawthorne, Morrison, Burnside and Broadway, letting boats through and pissing off impatient drivers.

Meanwhile, she gets to kick back and catch up on her reading, writing and painting. The booths also are equipped with a television and VCR to keep operators from getting too bored.

Hendel's mellow demeanor probably comes from the 13 years she spent in Hawaii. Her family bought an ice company and moved there when she was 5.

"I grew up in the rain forest," she says. "I didn't wear shoes until I went to high school."

A full academic scholarship brought her to University of Oregon. As is the case for most Pacific Northwest transplants, the weather

required some getting used to; however, the most difficult adjustment for Hendel was the frenzied stress levels of the mainland.

"I think anytime you move eastward, there's a quickening of the pace," she says. "It was kind of hard."

Even though she was surrounded by Eugene liberals and



Gabby Hendel watches over Morrison Bridge during one of her shifts

A room with a view

Lesbian bridge operator's job has its ups and downs

BY JIM RADOSTA

had a failed fling with a sorority girl, Hendel didn't get involved in any queer groups during her first couple of years on campus. The people she met during a rape awareness march changed all that.

"All of a sudden I had a handful of friends who really understood me," she says. "I didn't realize there were other people like me."

Before long, Hendel was serving as co-director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Alliance and organizing Lesbopalooza, an annual music festival that just keeps growing and growing. When the event started in 2000, eight bands were booked for a one-day show; this year, it added an extra day along with performance artists, an all-lesbian crew of fire dancers, workshops—even a Tupperware party thrown by folk singer Phranc.

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Hendel graduated in March with a degree in psychology and women's studies—"which means nothing, unless I get a master's." Her future might include social work, massage school or travel through Europe and North Africa.

Hendel, who lives in Southeast Portland with Hedi, her partner of 2 1/2 years, still makes it back to Hawaii a couple of times a year. However, she says it just isn't the same anymore.

"I'm just so overwhelmed by how assimilated the culture is into Western ideals," she says. "There are small businesses going under every single day."

In fact, corporate giant Costco forced her parents to close shop. Her dad eventually found work in Gresham, so now almost every member of the family has made the transition from Hawaiian to Oregonian.

For the time being, Hendel's biggest adjustment is getting used to being on call for work 24 hours a day. At least she has occasional crazy encounters to keep things interesting.

"I hear so many stories from other people. There was a jumper on the Burnside," she says, adding an interesting tidbit about the relatively low bridge, "but really, if they jumped they wouldn't die."

For all of her expertise, though, Hendel had to learn the hard way about the dangers of crossing the mighty Willamette. "I was skateboarding across the Hawthorne, and I hit a crack and fell flat on my face and skinned my knee."

But that wasn't the worst part—while she writhed in pain, she watched as her skateboard slowly rolled into the river. She jokes, "It was like the saddest day of my life." **JR**



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