

# WEST SIDE STORY

**Young activist encourages community members to get involved in the planning process** by Tom Stevenson

When the Portland City Council meets Sept. 26 to discuss the future of the West End, a number of people will be watching, including a young activist who has been feverishly involved in the project for several years.

Jacob Brostoff, 26, became interested for a number of reasons. Part of it is his inherently activist personality. Part of it has to do with his professional interests. And part of it has to do with the fact that he is a member of Portland's gay community, which could see the Burnside Triangle change dramatically in the coming years.

For all of those reasons—and many more—Brostoff is not only actively helping shape the future of the West End, he also is encouraging other sexual minorities to get involved.

"This neighborhood matters to our community as well as to residents of affordable housing and to small businesses," he says. "We have an obligation as a community to ensure our visibility in the city and to make things better for the next generation of queers. Community planning happens when communities make it happen; communities get political power by demanding it. If you choose silence, do not expect anyone to speak for you."

Brostoff says a "perfect" West End planning process would recognize and build upon the many assets the area already has. Among those assets, he notes, is a "strong, safe and visible sexual minority presence."

Brostoff's passion regarding the project ignited in part because of his professional background, which includes city planning. He is the transportation advocate at 1000 Friends of Oregon, but he previously served as a planning assistant with the city of St. Helens, working through the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments AmeriCorps program out of University of Oregon. He also served as a staff assistant with the city of Portland Office of Transportation and as an intern for Portland City Commissioner Jim Francesconi. On top of all that, he is finishing his master's degree in urban and regional planning at Portland State University.

Brostoff's activism goes even further back. He was raised in Wisconsin and grew up in a "very political environment, surrounded by Midwestern Catholics, Protestants and Jews who were active in the labor movement and politics, starting with civil rights in the 1960s."

"I remember licking envelopes with the father of the current mayor of Milwaukee during the mayoral campaign and hearing stories about how this Norwegian Lutheran minister was beaten and jailed marching in the South," he says. "My parents had lots of stories about living in Washington, D.C., in the 1960s, being on the Mall during the 'I Have a Dream' speech and watching the city burn from the rooftop of their apartment building in Dupont Circle. I grew up being among the first generation of kids to be bused to integrated schools in a city deeply divided by race and class. All of this made quite an impression on me."

Today, Brostoff says he has a great deal of



Jacob Brostoff says his mother, Phyllis Mensh Brostoff, raised him in a progressive political environment

concern about the West End also because of the professional and personal ethics he adheres to.

"As a professional city planner, I have an ethical obligation to ensure that all groups that are affected by planning decisions understand the implications of those decisions and can make their voices heard," he says. "As a queer, my community's visibility is very important to me. Visibility comes in many forms, including personal visibility as well as geographic visibility. My concerns about the West End and the Burnside Triangle stem from the intersection of my professional and personal obligations: the professional obligation to be an ethical planner and the personal obligation to ensure the safety, health and visibility of my community."

Brostoff says when he first examined the West End proposals, he quickly realized some members of the community were definitely not heard from in the planning process, including the poor, the homeless and sexual minorities. "The West End is a place that showcases Portland's diversity and has important historical significance to sexual minorities," he adds.

Keeping the West End at least partially intact is an important issue for the gay and lesbian community for a number of reasons, according to Brostoff. Among the functions he believes the neighborhood serves:

- Providing a safe place for gay men and lesbians to congregate, with a strong community policing presence.
- Providing a place for questioning and closeted people to be around others and explore the visible community.
- Providing examples of successful longtime gay-owned businesses.

That all could change, which is why Brostoff is encouraging everyone who thinks the issue matters to make their voices heard. □

The PORTLAND CITY COUNCIL will meet 2 p.m. Sept. 26 at 1221 S.W. Fourth Ave. To testify call 503-823-4082, fax 503-823-4571 or send e-mail to kmoore-love@ci.portland.or.us.

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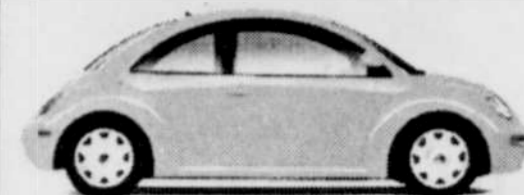
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