

Harriet Merrick is a woman who profoundly has influenced the lives of gay, lesbian, bi and trans Oregonians. Her life is woven into the state's political and social fabric.

In explaining what helped shape her into the person she is today, Merrick points to her 12 parochial school years at St. Mary's Academy in Portland. "We each have a unique experience" with school and religion, she says. "Mine was about the importance of community and giving back."

One pivotal experience for Merrick was learning about the life of migrant workers. These memories galvanized her work and life.

"I remember a nun drew a map of the cycle of the farmworkers and crops...and talked about how generations get trapped working with no education," she says. "I worked in the fields with migrant workers, picking fruit and cleaning migrant camps.... I saw people lived differently than me.... I could go home to hot water and soap," while the workers could not.

Merrick became more politically aware while attending Portland State University. She and her father, who worked on campus, watched the chaotic clashes between riot police and anti-Vietnam War demonstrators downtown. "I realized there was something wrong here," she says.

Merrick transferred to University of Oregon, entering the now-defunct Department of Community Service and Public Affairs. She planned to work in juvenile counseling.

Even though she was living in politically progressive Eugene, Merrick says coming out was difficult during these times. "Many of us didn't know what being gay or lesbian, or anything other than heterosexual, was."

In high school Merrick had girlfriends in two groups: One was "Beatles and Stones crazy," and

MERRICK'S MERITS

Basic Rights Oregon board co-chair makes the transition from campus activist to champion for equality by Susan Detroy

the other was "not into boys, doing things like camping." You can guess which group she ended up spending more time with.

"My mom was saying, 'You're a late bloomer,'" she says. "I wasn't worried about being gay.... [My] concerns were my career. I thought of it as a sociology problem."

Merrick joined the U of O Gay Peoples Alliance and soon became part of a blossoming campus movement with sex worker activist Carol Queen, author Randy Schultz and writer Will Roscoe. She learned a lesson in discrimination when her practicum placement was canceled after the agency director learned she was the coordinator of 1974 Gay Pride Week. True to her personal style, she turned the incident into an opportunity to educate, discussing the matter with staff and clients.

After graduation, Merrick says, "I fell in love with Eugene and decided to stay." She worked part time in the U of O business office, freelancing and volunteering in political and social activities, classes and speaking engagements. She has been working on campus ever since.

Merrick's list of political affiliations is considerable. In the mid-'70s as a member of the U of O Gay Student Union she participated in a successful boycott of discriminatory Harper and Row textbooks.

In 1978 she joined Metropolitan Community Church, serving on its board for two years. In the mid-'80s she was on the board of Willamette AIDS Council.



A University of Oregon graduate, Harriet Merrick has worked on campus for 26 years

In 1996 Merrick served as board chair for the Eugene Equality Project. She also is on the Lane County Executive Committee of the Democratic Party.

However, her most significant accomplishments have come during her battles against a number of high-profile ballot measures.

Merrick has been associated with Right to Privacy since the 1970s. The organization later merged missions with Basic Rights Oregon, the state's largest gay rights organization.

Its programs include the Fair Workplace Project, Fair Schools Project, Safe Schools Bill, Decline to Sign and, of course, constantly tracking the Oregon Citizens Alliance's latest agenda. Merrick, who serves as board co-chair, explained that BRO will be refining its strategies during an upcoming retreat.

With a busy political life, she says her leisure time is limited. She loves camping, getting away at least two times a summer, once annually with friends up the McKenzie River. From 1992 to 1997 she followed her heart to the small town of Glide, living on a sheep ranch while commuting to work in Eugene.

Merrick reflects on the philosophy that keeps her going: "Life is not sprint but a marathon.... I set goals for myself. I keep them in my head."

Sometimes when a lot of thoughts are bogging her down, she taps her internal spiritual self, taking time to disengage. "A drive to the coast" often helps clear her mind, she says.

Acquaintances agree Merrick is a person with admirable qualities—a model for all of us who aspire to live purposeful and thoughtful lives. **J**

The BASIC RIGHTS OREGON annual fall dinner starts 6 p.m. Oct. 19 at the Hilton Hotel, 921 S.W. Sixth Ave. For more information call 503-222-6151.

SUSAN DETROY is a Eugene free-lance writer.

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