

Cutting off her hair was the most freeing thing Susan Prock ever did in her life.

"I've always acted the way I've acted," she says. "But it gave me permission to be more myself."

Prock, who was working on a master's degree in women's studies at Oregon State University, was divorced and had a daughter. Soon thereafter she got married again, and things started to make sense in her life.

She took a class in women and sexuality and read Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. She identified so strongly with the trans main character, she felt she needed to warn her husband.

"I said: 'Gene, this could be bad for you. I think I'm transgendered,'" she says.

His response was simple.

"I'm pretty open," Gene says. "I asked if she wanted a divorce, she said no, I said, 'Then it's OK with me.'" Then he adds, "One of the reasons I was attracted to Susan was because of her short hair."

After graduating, Prock applied for a job as multicultural center coordinator at Linn-Benton Community College in Albany. While still struggling with her identity, she attended the first interview in a dress.

Calling herself her own best critic, Prock was certain she wouldn't get the job. So when she was asked back for a second interview, she decided to do it her way.

As she walked through the door to face the hiring committee, Prock was prepared for the looks, stares and questions concerning her suit and tie. But unbeknownst to her, she was walking into a haven of understanding.

The small-town community college broadly defines culture as a mixture of values, behaviors and beliefs linking a group of people

## A MULTICULTURAL WEB

Trans woman leads small-town campus down a more inclusive path

by Heather Hybarger

together. That allows the center to serve not only ethnic diversity but also sexual minorities, women, the timber industry, different religions and nontraditional students.

Student Life and Leadership director Tammi Paul-Bryant, who was in charge of the hiring committee, says she sensed Prock's trepidation.

"When she first came it was apparent when she had to go to meetings she was aware of people scrutinizing her."

For Prock, the suit and tie are not only an expression of her gender identity but of her professionalism, too. This was also something the committee was willing to understand. "We were very clear about who and what we were looking for, and how Susan dressed was



Susan Prock promotes dialogue among students at Linn-Benton Community College in Albany

not part of the criteria," Paul-Bryant explains.

Prock began her new job in September 2000. She soon realized the college was true to its word.

"When I got there I was scared, running a multicultural center, being visibly different," Prock says. "But I received such an outpouring of support, it was so awesome. The people on my hiring committee must have made this pact or something to look out for me and not leave me hanging."

The more Prock realized her identity was a nonissue, the more comfortable she became with herself. She began to expand her own concepts of multiculturalism as well.

"If you look at oppression as a web, you don't add one plus one plus one and get three; they interlock," she says. "To me, it makes perfect sense to have culture as not tied to a person's skin color or nationality."

She has found the students don't need much encouragement to get into discussions about some of the toughest issues facing the world today.

"It's hard some days to go in there and make sure there is safety even though there is a Seventh-day Adventist, a Buddhist, a Christian, a Wiccan, a lesbian who is still in the closet, a gay man who hates women, a weight-challenged person and a bald-headed white middle-class dude," Prock says. "I have empowered them to stop someone who is saying something offensive and bring it to their attention. These people have some pretty heated discussions, and I have to figure out when I should intervene and when I shouldn't."

It's the dialogue that Prock encourages, because it's the dialogue that is the most important factor in reaching a place of understanding. The students and staff and faculty who get involved in the center come away with skills that can be used across cultures of all types.

"Empathy, sensitivity and understanding are skills that allow interaction whether you agree or disagree," Paul-Bryant says. "We use these skills so that we can interact with each other in a respectful way." □

HEATHER HYBARGER is no longer a teen-ager, a student or a slacker but still finds time to lie around and do nothing. Some things never change.

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