

Basic Rights Oregon recently added two staff members: field director Jessica DuBois and program coordinator Melissa Shepherd. Both are new to Portland, although each visited the area before settling here.

The two have a lot in common as far as the kind of work they want to do and the world they hope to help build. They would like to make significant contributions to the civil rights of sexual minorities.

This will be their first experience in the ongoing battle against the Oregon Citizens Alliance, but each brings determination to the fight. Both came to the Pacific Northwest in search of opportunities for activism: Shepherd from a four-month experience in Ghana, and DuBois from a year of political work in Boston.

Shepherd was raised in Buffalo, N.Y. She says her parents gave her a lot of freedom to find her own interests and to be herself.

She encountered some problems after coming out to her mother but says "we're working it out now." Her father, "an awesome old hippie-turned-yuppie," always has been accepting of her and had no problem with her orientation.

Shepherd attended State University of New York in Buffalo, where she majored in health and human services with a concentration on community mental health. After graduating, she was ready to find a more challenging atmosphere than she felt Buffalo offered.

"It's an old city," she says with a touch of fondness, "but there's not a lot to do. I don't miss the snow a bit."

What she did find at SUNY Buffalo was her partner, Tina Barfoot, who now coordinates Bridge 13, an educational program for queer youth. They recently celebrated four years together.

When asked what she does in her free time, Shepherd laughs and says, "Is there life outside of activism?" However, she admits she and Barfoot enjoy hiking and love being in the outdoors.

Her visit to West Africa was through a university program. "It was hard for me to be there. I had never seen people so poor. There were many buildings without running water or sewers. The rich and the poor lived right next to each other," she says, describing the contrast as overwhelming.

Shepherd hopes to return someday. She felt a kinship with people who had a completely communal view of society. "Everything African is portrayed [in the United States] as being completely different from who they really are," she says.

Not being able to be out was also difficult. She made a few very closeted connections with other gay and lesbian people, which "cemented my drive to come back here."

Shepherd regretted leaving new friends behind, but the experience in Ghana had crystallized her desire to find a job that would let

NEW FACES

Basic Rights Oregon hires field director and program coordinator

by Patricia L. MacAodha



Jessica DuBois (left) and Melissa Shepherd are excited to be fighting for the civil rights of sexual minorities

her work for the civil rights of sexual minorities. Coming to Portland was a natural choice.

For the first six months, she picked up temporary jobs. Then the position at BRO came open.

Shepherd applied and was hired. As program coordinator, her primary focus is on the Fair Workplace Project, begun in 1996 but further motivated by 1998's Tanner vs. Oregon Health Sciences University decision.

She encourages businesses to sign a pledge to confront discrimination through educational programs. She spends a week at each office, collaborating with the employers so they understand what homophobia is and how they can work to stop it.

Shepherd also is helping revive BRO's Youth Advisory Committee, which provides a

way for people younger than 23 to get involved in queer politics and to connect with their peers. The next meeting will be held March 24.

Shepherd also facilitates Art Focus, a queer youth group at

Outside In, which approaches art as a process to growth and self-acceptance. She considered going into the field of art therapy and still thinks she might embrace it more seriously someday, but "it's on the back burner."

She also would like to be a welder but for now is happy with her job at BRO, which she considers the perfect workplace. She enjoys the teamwork: "We have fun."

That's what DuBois says, as well. She finds working for BRO exciting.

"It's fun," she says, "and people are funny."



DuBois (center) and her BRO co-workers participate in the Rally for Justice on Feb. 10 at Lewis & Clark College

Everybody works really hard." She is the field director for BRO, which feeds her enthusiasm for political work.

DuBois' college experiences stimulated an already keen sense of justice. She decided she wanted to try to find a job that supplied something more than just a paycheck.

She grew up in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, which has "a lot of arts and culture and is progressive politically." From Minnesota, she moved to Virginia with her mother and stepfather, later attending Oberlin College in Ohio.

The school's history of including women and African Americans in an integrated student body—it graduated the first black person in the nation—attracted DuBois, who wanted new experiences in a place she never had lived as well as an atmosphere that strengthened her commitment to human rights. She became a member of the campus queer organization and the Student Labor Action Coalition and lived in a house with a strong feminist orientation where residents focused on community programs.

In her course work, DuBois concentrated on political science. Her experiences working for legislators drew on her educational training.

"I really like politics," she says, "how policy decisions are made and what goes into it." She acknowledges being "idealistic" about what she believes she can do to confront things that are unfair, but she's determined to try.

Like Shepherd, DuBois met her partner, Tara Ikenouye, in college. They also have been together four years.

After Oberlin, the couple moved to Boston, where they lived for a year. What brought them to Portland?

"We wanted a change," DuBois says. "We had a college friend who moved here and loved it."

When they came to visit, they loved it, too, and decided to stay. When the position of field director opened up at BRO, DuBois was ready.

Her focus is to pursue candidate endorsements. She sends out questionnaires to political hopefuls, then stays in touch with their offices. She follows up on their responses and tracks their willingness to support legislation sympathetic to civil rights for sexual minorities.

Shepherd and DuBois are enjoying working together; their duties previously were incorporated into one job. They say they are excited about tackling what lies ahead. □

For more information about BASIC RIGHTS OREGON call 503-222-6151 or visit the Internet site www.basicrights.org.

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