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STEVE MARCH
by Jack Turteltaub

State Rep. Steve March, a Democrat from Portland's Central Eastside District 4, is a strong public advocate for the rights of sexual minorities. During the past legislative session he sponsored a measure that would have created a domestic partnership registry for Oregon similar to those in Multnomah County, Vermont and California.

The idea behind the bill is to grant the basic rights to sexual minority couples that straight spouses or common-law partners now enjoy. These include the power to make financial and health decisions and to access insurance benefits.

March supports the queer community because he believes sexuality is "hardwired. I don't think people choose to be one way or the other—they are what they are." He observes that there is a "full range of sexuality; some people are gay, some bisexual" in addition to the heterosexual majority.

He says he feels well accepted by the queer community. He thinks people who know him or his work see him as an enlightened supporter.

March's varied life experiences gave rise to his enlightened views of sexuality. After finishing his undergraduate work at Sacramento State University, he went on to work as an intern for Mervyn Dymally, the first African American elected to the California Assembly.

He worked in the state legislature and then



State Rep. Steve March (left, with Basic Rights Oregon board chairman Frank Dixon) sponsored legislation that would have created a domestic partnership registry for Oregon

for the lieutenant governor. It was the tumultuous 1960s, a time of tremendous social unrest with civil rights and anti-war protest movements that took their agendas to the streets.

In state politics, March was exposed to different minority groups and ethnic cultures, and he came to appreciate diversity and understand

the need for coalition building. He also became a small-businessman with at least one openly gay employee—whose sexual orientation, needless to say, "wasn't an issue."

Tiring of California politics and the summer heat, he eventually migrated to the cooler Pacific Northwest, living briefly in Seattle and Bend

before settling in Portland. He decided to return to graduate school and pursue a teaching career, obtaining a master's degree and a doctorate in urban studies at Portland State University in 1997.

March also went back to the public sector, working for the Multnomah County auditor and then for Commissioner Lisa Naito as a staff assistant. He now is an adjunct professor at PSU's Institute of Aging.

He ran unsuccessfully in the 1996 primary but came back in 2000 to win his first election. His current focus is on getting re-elected.

March notes that he lives in a district where voters consistently have rejected the Oregon Citizens Alliance's

ballot measures. But as a Democrat, he operates in a Legislature that is controlled by a more conservative Republican majority.

Although he is disappointed his bill didn't make it out of the House Judiciary Committee, he plans to pursue the issue in the future—a future about which he is hopeful. "Over time, I think the public will come to a better understanding about the issue of equal rights" for sexual minorities.

March's willingness to stand up and be counted for the sexual minorities community distinguishes him from many straight legislators and certainly would invite criticism from certain quarters. But he says he won't compromise his principles: "Sometimes you have to do what you have to do." □

"Over time, I think the public will come to a better understanding about the issue of equal rights"

—Steve March

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