

They're here, they're queer, get to know them

# Family Pride

**W**e all might fit under that oft-used umbrella term "queer," but we're all very different indeed. We'd like to introduce you to some folks who remind us of the diversity of our happy little family.



Tobin Britton

## TOBIN BRITTON

When Tobin Britton moved here from Seattle about eight years ago, she immediately became familiar with the leather scene. A member of Portland Leather Alliance, Blackout Leather Productions, Bad Girls and the Rose City Discussion Club, the 31-year-old entered the Oregon State Ms. Leather competition last year, and darned if she didn't win.

Now, you know how the circuit works, right? You win at state and go straight on to nationals. So Britton found herself in Washington, D.C., last April running for American Leatherwoman 2002, the only specifically gay and lesbian leather competition in the country. And darned if she didn't win.

When they announced as first runner-up the contestant Britton thought might win the title, she was sure she hadn't placed. "I had already done that thing in my head," she recalls. "Oh, you know, you did your best." And then they called my name and I went, "What?!"

From there, it got a little overwhelming. "People rushed the stage...it was crazy. I found out what celebrities go through," she laughs. "I never imagined I'd be standing on a stage with thousands of bulbs going off in my face and people shoving their hands in mine and giving me cards.... There was a line of people waiting to congratulate the new 'family.' It took me 45 minutes to get offstage."

That family feeling, though, is what keeps Britton in the community. "All the people I've met so far have been positive and supportive of my beliefs and the things that I'm into...the straight world and even some of the gay and lesbian community have this really false idea [about] the leather com-

munity. They think it's all about kinky sex and all of the horrible things we do to one another," she smiles, "but...there's a lot that goes on. We do a lot of good for the gay and lesbian community and even the straight world; they just don't know it. We're activists—out there fighting for everybody's sexual preferences and identities."

Britton will travel around now representing her title, leading discussions and offering workshops.

So what's left after you're the American Leatherwoman? Well, there's Ms. World and International Ms. Leather; Britton will wait and see how she feels about tackling those later.

"If I keep going this way, I'll have a title every year," she laughs. "Which would be cool."

—Lisa Bradshaw

## MELISSA BROWN

The Portland-area queer community should breathe a sigh of relief. Melissa Brown, student, forensics team member, mom, sister, partner and future lawyer is busy changing hearts and minds one life at a time.

She has been studying political science at Mt. Hood Community College and soon will transfer to Reed. She reports being "totally stoked" about the her acceptance and plans to continue on to law school. "I realize lawyers are the pariahs of our society, but I am in love with the process of law and the ideals of the system."

It makes sense that a woman in love with debate would be attracted to criminal defense, civil liberties and civil rights law. The challenge of preparing an argument from one's own bank of knowledge in a short amount of time, and on a subject and from a position you have no control over, is "inherently satisfying" to Brown. "It's a game of wits, and I hate to lose!"

When Brown isn't stepping up to the podium, she's busy with her three daughters, ages 7, 9 and 11; her partner of four years; and her 19-year-old sister, who lives with them. Lesbian parenting is an ongoing challenge for the couple, who occasionally have to make judgment calls



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

## Melissa Brown

about how much explaining they should do to their daughter's friends about their relationship.

"While we have no shame or desire to hide anything, you have to wonder if you will totally freak out some kid...or their parents...and have some inadvertent negative consequence for your own child," Brown says. However, her children are growing up learning important lessons about difference, acceptance and varying belief systems.

Brown grew up in a family where those messages were mixed. "My stepfather was vocally homophobic," she says.

Luckily, Mom was accepting. "My mother is incredible! She has been tremendously supportive and in fact seems to be much more approving of the choices I've made in my life since coming out."

And those choices, along with family support and a strong sense of self, have made Melissa Brown a valuable asset to our community. "I realize my contribution needs to be living my life without shame or fear and with a sense of honesty. As a lesbian, as a mother, as a student or at work, I need to be myself and show the world that I am no different than anyone else."

—Erin Sexton

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