



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Cushing spreads the word during Portland Pride 2002

there is very little data about the smoking rates of our population or what to do about it. I became a little obsessed with finding out why."

Cushing began interviewing leaders of the sexual minorities community, as well as "anyone I can grab for a few minutes," about queer smoking habits. She soon had a strong consensus: "Many community leaders are very worried about the many young LGBTI people they see smoking. Almost everyone interviewed feels the LGBTI community has a problem with tobacco use and that they would be willing to help advocate for resources to help us quit and prevent us from starting to use tobacco."

Why are smoking rates higher among gay and lesbian people than in the general population? "One reason we smoke more," Cushing says, "is because the bar culture, with its emphasis on drinking and smoking, is where many

young LGBTI folks go to feel comfortable when they are coming out."

A second reason stems from homophobia. "Because we are an oppressed group with all the accompanying stress," Cushing says, "we are looking for stress releases, and the popular view of smoking is that it relaxes people."

Thirdly, the sexual minorities community has been heavily targeted by the tobacco industry's ad campaigns. "Smoking has been made to look...both tough and sexy—something rebels do—and what young LGBTI person has not wanted to identify as a tough and/or sexy rebel during those confusing adolescent years?"

Cushing would like to counter these forces by starting a campaign of her own. Her project ideally would be modeled after the successful Oregon Tobacco Prevention and Education Program—only hers would be specifically targeted

to sexual minorities. It includes local coalitions, school-based programs, the Oregon Quit Line, and public awareness and education.

The sexual minorities community "gets little dribs and drabs of attention—a sponsorship here, some materials there—but nothing on a consistent, ongoing basis," Cushing says. "That needs to change." She would like to "insist that Oregon's tobacco prevention program begin treating our population like any other diverse group—a diverse group with a high smoking rate!"

Cushing emphasizes that the first step in battling tobacco is gathering information about the smoking habits of queer people. This opportunity will begin this month, when a pilot question about sexual orientation will be included on the Oregon Department of Human Services survey. "This will have great implications for lots of programs that need information about our population but will really help us in tobacco control," Cushing says.

But her passion for activism doesn't stop there. She also helps organize the Race for the Cure, sponsored by the Portland and southwest Washington affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

While 25 percent of the proceeds fund national research, the rest is dedicated to fighting breast cancer locally, funding free mammograms and educational programs. As Cushing says, "This is a wonderful opportunity to give time, energy and/or money in a way that helps people right here in Oregon and southwest Washington."

Cushing, who serves as race committee chairwoman, hopes for a record turnout Sept. 15, calling it "one of the most moving, powerful events we can participate in every year. More than 42,000 people registered to walk or run last year—and you can't imagine the beauty and power of that many men, women and children all united behind those who have suffered and survived breast cancer and those who have lost loved ones to the disease."

Perhaps Cushing's deep appreciation for activism emerged from the contrast between the sexual minorities community and her upbringing in Tulsa, Okla. "My mother was a liberal, feminist Democrat psychologist in the midst of a bunch of Republican engineers working for the oil company. It was not a good fit!"

She was not aware she was a lesbian until she was about 35 and hadn't "heard the words gay or lesbian until college.... I somehow always leaned to the left—and left Tulsa as soon as I could."

Cushing's love of the sexual minorities community also underlies her passion for supporting queer health: "I believe we are an underserved, underrecognized group of people. We are less

likely to take care of ourselves and, when we are sick, less likely to seek medical attention. Again, those of us with the ability, knowledge and freedom to help folks stay healthier longer really ought to step up to the plate. Plus, I love the color and vibrancy of our community. We have already lost too many. I am absolutely committed to keeping as many of us as possible around as long as possible!"

Ultimately, Cushing's motivation for activism is borne of gratitude—gratitude for her ability to give back to the communities that support her. "I feel that although I am a member of our LGBTI community," she says, "I am also a part of the larger community of people here in the metro area, and I do want to give back a little."

She has made community involvement a priority in her life because she simply enjoys it: "I can't imagine giving my life energy away to make money for someone else, since I don't absolutely have to—I would rather spend that energy making things better for people, including myself! The other reason is that I can, so I think I should. Those of us with as many privileges as I have had in my life really ought to give others a leg up." □

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PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

The busy activist attends a Race for the Cure kick-off event June 27 at Pioneer Place

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