

# TAKING ON CITY HALL

**Sam Adams considers running for council in 2004**

by Timothy Krause

"I love cities," Sam Adams says. "My passion is around city life and making it better."

Adams has served as Portland Mayor Vera Katz's chief of staff since she took office in 1992. His 10 years as her right hand is an example of his commitment to the city's well-being.

Yet, this 38-year-old gay man views his accomplishments at City Hall as more productive than political. "Politics are definitely part of what you need to get things done," Adams says, "but what I enjoy most of my work is the public service aspect of it."

A variety of influences have contributed to this sense of community commitment, beginning with small-town life and a civic-minded family. Although born in rural Montana, Adams grew up in Newport and Eugene. Through high school and college, he was heavily involved in student government.

A university adviser helped Adams set his early career goals, outlining a practical checklist of political preparedness: Learn a foreign language, experience a foreign country, develop critical-thinking skills, and seek real-world training. Reaching that final task—an internship with the Lane County Board of Commissioners—also marked the beginning of his professional career in government.

There, Adams met U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio and soon lived and breathed election politics during campaign season. He helped win that race and went on to serve as an aide in the congressman's Eugene office before accepting a position as political director of the Oregon House Democratic Campaign Committee.

During his tenure at the state Capitol, Adams met Katz, who was speaker of the Oregon House at that time. When she decided to run for the Portland mayor's seat, she asked him to manage her campaign. And when she won the office, she hired him to serve as her chief of staff.

"I love involving people in the process," Adams observes. "I don't mind getting in a room with people that really disagree with each other—and may really disagree with me. I love that kind of give-and-take because I think you can come to really good solutions. Without that kind of interaction—that passionate and thorough discussion—I don't think your solutions are as deep or meaningful or long-lasting."

One example of this process has been the overhaul of the city's purchasing system. After years of difficult restructuring, the once-moribund system now includes a program providing contracting opportunities for minorities, women and emerging small businesses. Furthermore, companies with city contracts must be equal opportunity employers, prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Results such as this mark success for Adams, who is most proud of his contributions in the civil rights arena. He serves on the boards of Basic Rights Oregon and Cascade AIDS Project.

On the whole, he considers the relationship between City Hall and Portland's sexual minori-



When his busy schedule permits, Sam Adams enjoys gardening, skiing, backpacking and learning to windsurf

ties community a positive one. Both sides, however, must continue cooperative efforts rather than work on issues in isolation.

"Just because we have laws or ordinances on the books doesn't mean the problem is solved and we can walk away," states Adams, who lives in Northwest Portland with Greg Eddie, his partner of 10 years. "This mayor and this

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council are very strong and adamant supporters of the rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks."

During the Katz administration, for example, Portland's nondiscrimination ordinance was expanded to include gender identity. Other advances in which Adams has lent a hand include domestic partner benefits for city employees as well as a domestic partnership registry for Multnomah County residents.

Just as his sexual orientation helps motivate his civil rights efforts, it also furnishes him with insight and sensitivity to constituencies struggling for inclusion.

"I can relate to people who feel like they don't belong, for whatever reason," he says, recounting his conservative childhood and lack of positive gay role models. "It was a very macho

atmosphere. There was a sense of privacy in which you don't talk about these things."

Adams eventually did talk about himself, coming out to his friends and family at age 23.

From his own experience, he's learned that "when you're raised in an environment in which being gay is not a good thing, often the biggest obstacles are self-imposed: 'I can't do that' or 'I won't be accepted.' But if you show the courage to take the risk, most of the time you find out that you can do it."

As chief of staff, Adams plays a significant role in municipal issues of all kinds, but it is always one of recommendation or implementation. For him, there's a big difference between that and actually making the decisions that guide the city.

In some ways, his experience thus far has been an apprenticeship for service as an elected official. "I know I have to take on a new challenge soon," he comments, "and I know elected office would definitely present me with a new challenge to go the distance with public service."

Adams tested the waters briefly this past spring when he expressed interest in the City Council seat vacated by Commissioner Charlie Hales. But the short period until the special election didn't leave enough time for developing a thorough platform while raising sufficient funds to run successfully as a first-time candidate. Instead, he has endorsed Multnomah County Commissioner Serena Cruz for the position.

Still, Adams is seriously considering running for City Council in 2004, should a seat become available. And his platform already is being developed.

"My work has been about making positive changes on some really difficult issues," he says. "I have some perspective on how good Portland is because I haven't always lived here. I also had a family that had a lot of struggles, so I know what that's about. My experience, my scar tissue, all the mistakes I've made, the accomplishments I've had—I bring that all to the job."

Adams also would convey to the council projects specifically related to the sexual minorities community, such as ways to deal with schoolyard bullying and issues specific to the workplace. He would not be afraid to use the role of commissioner as a kind of bully pulpit in order to talk about important concerns that might fall outside the city's authority.

He also would want to reach out to towns across Oregon in order to build a more statewide approach to particular issues, such as discrimination. To that end, he believes Portland could be a role model in many ways, saying, "It's just unconscionable that it's still legal in many parts of the state to engage in blatant homophobic discrimination."

But is a City Council position merely another means to an end, namely the mayor's seat?

Adams brushes off such long-term speculation but does believe Portlanders are ready to consider a gay mayor. They will look at a candidate's experience and intentions first, he thinks, and sexual orientation will be way down the list of considerations, if at all. ☐

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