

An open letter to *Just Out* readers

First I must compliment Marty Davis for her insightful and probably courageous editorial on the Judy Shepard ads. Secondly, I would like to make it clear that Secretary of State Bill Bradbury and I have been friends for many years and I have a huge amount of respect for him, as well as his personal support of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

I have stayed silent as I've watched the public discussion regarding Senator Gordon Smith, Judy Shepard and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) unfold. I have been very disturbed at how misinformed and misleading most of it was. I can no longer stay silent.

If you disagree with Senator Smith on the environment, choice or other issues, say so. But to say that during the last five years in the Senate he has not been a key, loyal and consistent leader on issues so important to the GLBT community is just plain not true. Senator Smith has been at the forefront in nearly all the concerns that are important to the GLBT community at the federal level. His tireless leadership on the federal hate crimes bill has received lots of attention. You may not know, however, that without his help in bringing 13 other fellow Republicans along it simply would not have passed in the Senate and Senator Gordon Smith has gone to the Senate floor 189 times to talk about a new hate crime and to admonish his fellow Senators for not supporting the bill.

What some may not know is that he is one of the co-sponsors of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). He knows that in 38 states (including Oregon) it is still legal to fire someone just because they are gay or lesbian. And he has cajoled and arm-twisted others in his party to join him as a co-sponsor.

When Jim Hormel was nominated by President Clinton to become the first openly gay Ambassador in U.S. history, Senator Smith was his staunchest ally. He has helped and co-sponsored many bills to increase HIV/AIDS funding nationally and internationally. This year Senator Smith and his office were instrumental in helping HRC and others garner a \$300 million increase in Ryan White funds. Groups like Cascade AIDS Project (CAP), AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation get 30 percent to 40 percent of their funding from Ryan White dollars. By taking such a strong stand on these issues he has consistently defied his party's leaders.

When Gordon Smith came to the Senate in 1996, many in the party touted him as a probable leader in the party, some even mentioning presidential or vice presidential candidacy. Many of those same people now say that his chances are dramatically dimmed because of his strong stands on gay and lesbian issues which are so diametrically opposed to the Republican party's platform as well as a large part of their base.

HRC's decision to endorse Senator Smith was based on the commitment and cooperation received from the Senator and his office over the last five years.

The Democratic party as a whole is immeasurably better on the issues that the lesbian and gay community holds dear. However, if HRC doesn't stand with one of the strongest leaders in the Senate on gay and lesbian issues, why, in the future, would any Republican or any politician for that matter, stand with us in support of gay and lesbian equality? We need the support of Senators in both parties in order to get increases in AIDS funding and to get ENDA passed. We must have bipartisan support in order to stop the dozens of horrific anti-gay bills introduced every year.

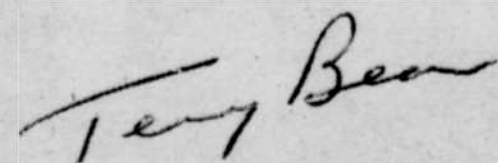
Don't get me wrong. I'm not asking any individual to be nonpartisan. Certainly I have not been nor do I intend to be in the future. I've raised money for 34 years for Democrats in Oregon and across the country and I don't intend to stop. But in order for organizations like HRC to be effective—in order to get legislation passed—they must be bipartisan. That means supporting candidates of both parties who clearly support its legislative goals.

Since her son's death Judy Shepard has devoted nearly every day of her life fighting for gay and lesbian rights. She meets with Senators, rallies congressional support and speaks out at many events. The last couple of years she has worked shoulder to shoulder with Senator Smith to see that the federal hate crimes bill is passed as a legacy to Matthew. The angry letters she has received from some Oregonians greatly saddens me. The letter writers are obviously free to express their opinions, but it breaks my heart to see these people do so with such disrespect for what this woman has done for us as a community.

We should revel in the fact that for the first time in history a U.S. Senator has highlighted his support for gay rights in an ad campaign. That is an historic event. This Senator just happens to be a Republican.

It is unfortunate there are still those in the GLBT activist community that refuse to embrace progress and welcome newcomers to our fold. The pursuit of basic equality and justice for our community is a mission that must transcend partisan politics to succeed. Basic human rights must be an ideal embraced by all people regardless of sexual orientation, race, religion and yes, even political party.

For our mission to succeed, supporters of gay and lesbian equality cannot become an exclusive club. Thanks for listening.



Terry Bean