



Stephanie Cho focuses on prescription drug, food stamp and welfare issues

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Thanks to queer Asian activist Stephanie Cho, underrepresented voices in low-income and ethnic minority communities are gaining skills to build their political power.

The 26-year-old works for Oregon Action, a statewide nonprofit that fights for economic justice. Its strategy is to teach people the political skills they need for organizing and lobbying.

Cho's job is to show low-income Portlanders how to build their leadership on prescription drug, food stamp and welfare issues.

She has a rich history in social justice organizing, having worked with the Asian Family Center, Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center and Flavors.

Her successes at Oregon Action include helping organize a well-attended candidates forum last summer. She wanted members of underserved communities to grill the political hopefuls about how they would make prescription drugs more accessible.

"Most of the people who came were from Northeast Portland," she says. "We also provided transportation and picked up people from Alberta Simmons [Plaza] and Columbia Villa—300 people came!"

Additionally, Cho does outreach to get ethnic minorities involved in decision making. She helped initiate a people of color committee for the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, a regional group to which Oregon Action belongs.

She also makes sure ethnic minorities are involved in policy decisions and research. "We say 'health care for everybody,' but that tends to imply white people; it leaves out people of color." Because there is a dearth of ethnic minorities attending policy-making meetings, Cho says they often feel excluded.

Oregon Action has had success in involving people of color in the organization. The Portland board has a 60-40 ratio of nonwhite to white members.

Statewide, Oregon Action recently passed affirmative action policies, one stipulating that it will not endorse candidates or campaigns if they are weak on race issues, even if they are strong on economic justice. Still, the nonprofit has its shortcomings, Cho admits, such as a lack of organizing for trans people.

She is out to everybody at work. "The staff is gay, and the leaders [the people she organizes] don't care. Sometimes they question if the word 'queer' is derogatory, but that's all."

For Cho, racism seems to be a bigger issue and something she experiences more in her daily life than homophobia, which is "not as

much a big deal for me. A lot of times organizations ask you to choose between being queer or being a person of color, as if you can't be both. But everything is connected."

Cho notes a subtle and socially acceptable form of racism called cultural appropriation. "People identify as people of color—like being 1/18 Cherokee or Asian."

But, Cho says, they only want to be involved with the positive parts of that minority group, not the negative aspects. "People get Asian tattoos or go on Native American vision quests but don't understand the context."

Cho was disappointed with the recent Creating Change conference's anti-racism theme. "All these things—sexism, racism, homophobia—they are all tied together; they aren't separated out. It's like, OK, now this year we will do anti-racism. By focusing on anti-racism, it becomes more for white people than for empowering people of color."

And, she says, issues such as sexism weren't addressed. "The workshop for Asian Americans was mostly guys, and they did all the talking."

Unfortunately, Cho says there was some backlash to empowering people of color at the conference. She gave a workshop and asked that only ethnic minorities answer a particular question. "I heard later that some people were offended, saying, 'Why can't I answer the question?'"

Another example of racism Cho and other queers of color face in Portland is a lack of public places to socialize. "If I go to the E Room, there are hardly any people of color there—it's not my community," she says.

Cho used to frequent the Players Club. "There were a lot of women of color there, but it got closed down due to the fights."

She says nightclubs frequented by people of color are closed down more often than those frequented by whites. "There are fights at the E Room and at Ringlers, but they don't get shut down."

Cho, who was adopted from Korea by a white couple in the United States, also is interested in transracial adoption issues. She says many queers want to adopt children from foreign countries to give them an opportunity for a good life but are not able to deal with racial issues that come up. "Queer oppression is different than racial oppression," she warns. □

For more information about OREGON ACTION call 503-282-6588 or visit the Internet site [www.oregonaction.org](http://www.oregonaction.org).

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## A PIECE OF THE ACTION

Stephanie Cho works to give the marginalized a powerful voice

by Natalie Shapiro

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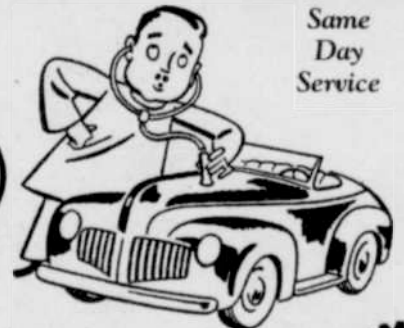


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