

**G**ay Republican. To many people the term is an oxymoron. But to Karl Rohde, two-term city councilor in Lake Oswego, being gay and being Republican are not mutually exclusive at all.

One of only three openly gay elected officials in all of Oregon, his political career began in 1989 when a street near his home was closed without input from the neighborhood. Frustrated, he volunteered for one committee after another until deciding to run for City Council in 1994.

After being declared the winner by *The Lake Oswego Review*, Rohde wound up losing by a mere 263 votes once the absentee ballots were counted. Undaunted, he immediately announced his candidacy for 1996 and won. In 2000 he was re-elected to a second four-year term.

Last spring he ran for state senator of District 19; he lost the GOP nomination. "I wanted to win, but it was a three-way primary with two moderates and a conservative."

The handsome 35-year-old, who is single, was born and raised in Lake Oswego, where he attended Waluga Junior High and "Lakeridge Health & Country Club." His father was politically active and friendly with all of the state's major Republicans in the 1960s and '70s. From a very young age, Rohde remembers heated political discussions and passionate arguments among his family and friends.

Although he says he knew he was gay at age 10 ("I had a huge crush on the cutest guy in the class"), Rohde didn't come out until he was 30. An avid cook, he loves to entertain friends, a skill that has been handy in running his successful event-planning business, Precision Events.

Rohde is passionate about the minutia of transportation planning for the tri-county area. While City Council is supposed to be a part-time position with a minimal salary ("we get \$128.36 each month with a cost-of-living adjustment each year that's about the value of a latte"), he spends more than 40 hours a week attending meetings and reading "ungodly long documents."

And although he says his constituents in Lake Oswego are not bothered by the fact that he's gay, his hair color has been another matter: "I had no idea how many people watch [the council meetings on public access] cable, because I had, over the years, made decisions that affected thousands of people and millions of dollars worth of real estate and gotten a smattering of, say, 10 to 12 e-mails. Then I go and bleach my hair and, after the first council meeting, I got over 200 e-mails from people about it. And the calls came from as far away as Banks!"

**Floyd Sklaver:** What is the reaction to your being gay in the Republican Party?

**Karl Rohde:** Well, I have one [heterosexual]

## KARL'S MARKS

### Gay city councilor makes the grade in Lake Oswego

by Floyd Sklaver

friend who's a Republican [who] said, "It's kind of like being a Jew in the Nazi party." He said he was very proud of me but doesn't understand how I do it.... There are probably an awful lot of Republicans that don't know I'm gay because...there never seemed to be a good way to work the homosexual agenda into the topic of transportation funding.

**FS: What's your stand on the environment?**

**KR:** I'm generally an environmentalist in a sustainable fashion, and I think there are a lot of Republican principles that fuse into that, such as "Don't cause damage that's going to cost us more money to clean up in the future." You're just creating a need to raise taxes because we're going to have to fix it.

**FS: How do you reconcile your views as an environmentalist with President Bush's dismal record on the environment?**

**KR:** I used this line when I was running for office: that I'm more representative of the first 120 years of the Republican Party than I am the last 20 years. The Republican Party was formed to free the slaves; it initiated, fought for and achieved a woman's right to vote; and it was the party that set aside vast tracts of lands for preservation by Teddy Roosevelt. You look here at home, and you have people like Tom McCall signing land-use planning with a Republican Legislature and the Bottle Bill and the Beach Bill.... The fact that there may be some recent shifts in that policy under the current administration doesn't mean you just abandon the party. I, with a lot of other people, am working very hard to rescue the party and bring it back to its moderate roots.

**FS: How so?**

**KR:** There's an organization called the Mainstream Republican Party with people like Gordon Smith and Greg Walden who are making efforts right now to lead the party back to its more centrist roots. When I decided to run for the state Senate it was recommended to me that I might want to read the [Oregon] Republican Party platform. This is a document that is roughly 22 pages, and the first 16 pages, which are single-spaced and in 10-point type, dealt almost exclusively with abortion and homosexuality. In reading that, though, and seeing how this hijacking of the party took place, I gained a

tremendous amount of respect for the strategy employed by the ultra-right wing. They recognized before anyone else the power of precinct committee persons. Recently, in the last election, because of a "massive" write-in campaign by my mother, aunt and brother, I became a precinct committee person in my district.

**FS: You won with only three votes?**

**KR:** That's all it takes. They [the religious conservatives] recognized that they have three of their folks in every precinct in the state and that very few people run for these things. So they were able to sail in there and write their names in on the ballots and, boom, they were elected.

**FS: Where is the power in the precinct committee person?**

**KR:** The precinct committee people get together, and they select who the county chairperson will be. [Then] the county chairpeople get together, and they decide who the state chair is, and they write the party platform. So, very easily they were able to gain control of the party and write a platform to include things that most Republicans, whether they had strong feelings or not, feel don't belong in the platform. As abhorrent as the direction those folks took the party is, I've got to respect them for figuring out the strategy. It was absolutely brilliant and executed perfectly. We, the mainstreams and moderates, finally recognize we need to get precinct people elected.

**FS: Where would like to see the Republican Party go?**

**KR:** I think I'd like to see it de-emphasize



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

social issues and return to its underpinnings of equality issues, economic issues, fiscal policy issues.

**FS: Do you ever consider leaving the party?**

**KR:** No. If my ship has been hijacked by pirates, I'm going to fight them to the death. It's the warrior in me.

**FS: What overall impression would you like to leave us with?**

**KR:** I think a lot of people would rather that I constantly identify myself as a gay man and make that my issue, but it's not. My issue is transportation policy. I don't see where my homosexuality is relevant to transportation policy. I would never suggest that we restripe the streets pink. ☐

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance writer.

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