

On a cold sunny day, Devan Deuel walks briskly from house to house. His hand-held computer beeps, warning of a dog.

"That's the sign of a good meter reader," Deuel says, complimenting the co-worker who programmed the alert. "They are keeping themselves and everyone behind them safe."

When the 39-year-old began working at Portland General Electric, he figured it would be a good place to transition from female to male. The job offered a level of anonymity a desk job could not, and the company's policies seemed like they might be supportive.

"They have unisex bathrooms at that building," he says. "The uniform is unisex. Everything was so perfect for me to go about it."

In five short years, Deuel has gone from anonymity to celebrity by being named National Meter Reader of the Year 2002.

The award from Itron Corp., a producer of hand-held meter reading computers, judged applicants from more than 100 companies in the United States and Canada. Quick and accurate reading of gas and electric meters were two things considered, along with customer service, volunteer time and contribution to the community. For Deuel, much of that volunteerism is with the queer community.

The Gresham native logged in more than 145 volunteer hours last year. Many of them were as board president of the Live and Let Live Club, the only queer 12-step group in Oregon.

Deuel's supervisor, Gil Rodriguez, nominated him for the award. He said Deuel's strong work ethic, accuracy, support to co-workers and professional growth in the past 1 1/2 years made him stand out as a clear choice for the nomination. "It's been a difficult year of uncertainty,"

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Trans man wins National Meter Reader of the Year award

by Kathy Belge

Rodriguez says, referring to the company's affiliation with the Enron debacle, "and to have this bright and shiny award shows us that we're still doing good work out in the field."

As part of the award, Deuel and his partner of eight years, Brenda Schillenberg, were flown to Florida and treated like celebrities at the Itron Users Conference. "It was absolutely fun!" he smiles.

About a month after he began at PGE, Deuel was invited to help start a new group for gay and lesbian employees. He agreed, and Galeforce was born.

He was outed as trans at the second meeting but reports everyone was supportive. The group has about 45 members, of which nine are active.

"This group is very interesting," Deuel says, "because there are a lot of higher-ups in the group. And they like to push the envelope."



Devan Deuel experienced a smooth transition while working for Portland General Electric

PHOTO BY KATHY BELGE

Thanksgiving dinners, adopt a family (a lesbian and her children) at Christmas, clean up the yard of a man with AIDS and help low-income people weatherize their homes. "I'm really proud to be a member of that group because those nine people have made some differences in Portland," Deuel says.

Not everything about his transition at work was positive, though; a few co-workers made his life difficult. "I had half the work group calling me 'he' and half the work group calling me 'she,'" Deuel says.

A few accused him of getting preferential treatment. "Looking back on it I probably would have gone to HR first and sat down and had some sort of a game plan," Deuel says.

But even when things got hard, he was able to call on the company-provided psychologist. Just being able to tell somebody at PGE that this was tough for him helped.

She ended up being a valuable resource when it came time for surgery. She researched policy and verified with human resources that the procedure was not elective.

Deuel says of his transition at PGE: "It hasn't hurt me at all, and on some levels I think it's helped me because they see how I've handled it. I helped them with policy, and I think they have gained some respect out of watching me deal with the whole thing. As far as I know, I am the only trans person at PGE. For their first one, they've done a pretty good job."

This is not to say it was all easy. "I've paid a fairly substantial price for being able to live in my own skin," Deuel says. "It changed everything in my life—things that I did want to change and many things that I didn't." □

KATHY BELGE is a Portland free-lance writer.



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