

**NORTHWEST**news

# MOVING ON

## Eugene lesbian reflects on years of disability activism

by Susan Detroy

"I've always had a keen awareness of injustice and wanted to be a champion for equality," Susie Grimes says. "I grew up in a racially tense environment. I was a lesbian in high school in the Midwest in the early '70s. It was not an open or tolerant environment."

The Eugene woman channeled this commitment to justice into years of activism within the disability rights movement, advocating for equality and inclusion regardless of physical condition. Having recently completed her tenure at an international nonprofit, she took *Just Out* down her long road to recovery and rehabilitation.

Grimes grew up near Dayton, Ohio, and moved to Oregon in 1973, attracted to the state's natural beauty and Eugene's relaxed atmosphere. She initially worked as a gas station attendant, an office manager at a women's auto repair collective and, in 1976, a founder of Full Moon Rising, a forestry workers cooperative for women.

In 1978 at the age of 23, she permanently injured her back and lower extremities after falling from a 70-foot tree and landing on her feet. She was flown by Coast Guard helicopter from the accident site near the Rogue River to Eugene, where her surgery began 12 hours later.

Grimes broke her back in two places and shattered both ankles. She was paralyzed from the waist down.

"It took me two years to realize my injuries were going to be permanent, because I had experienced many accidents and broken bones that I fully recovered from," she says. "Recovery became a lifelong process."

Grimes emerged an activist and athlete, excelling in wheelchair basketball, rugby and soccer. For 15 years she coached and played with "amazingly strong people: paraplegics, quadriplegics, blind people, deaf people, amputees, developmentally disabled people...people who use power wheelchairs."

She served as chairwoman of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association women's division and assistant coach of the 1996 Paralympics women's wheelchair basketball team, which took home a bronze medal. "Sports...gave me confidence and allowed my warrior nature to thrive, in a healthy way," she says.

In 1994 Grimes began working with Mobility International USA, a nonprofit that encourages relief organizations to include more people with disabilities in microenterprise, disaster relief, refugee, health education and literacy programs. The idea is that the development projects need to be serving everyone in those communities, especially people with disabilities, who represent about 20 percent of the population. An estimated 80 percent of the world's population of disabled people live in developing



PHOTO BY SUSAN DETROY

Susie Grimes has traveled around the world to empower people with disabilities

countries because of inadequate health care, nutrition, immunization and rehabilitation.

In 1998 Grimes participated in a wheelchair basketball tour to Bosnia organized to create awareness of land mines and disability issues. She also has led exchange groups to Mexico, Germany and Costa Rica.

"Susie has a passion and commitment to excellence in all she does," says Susan Sygall, MIUSA executive director and co-founder. "She is deeply committed to advancing the human rights of people with disabilities."

Grimes talks about disability activism as a human rights issue. "I was not an activist until I really understood the unjust treatment disabled people were experiencing. I wanted to be part of a movement working on reversing the trend of exclusion and discrimination."

She believes the activists play an important role in raising awareness about legal protection against discrimination and working to achieve laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"We talk about inclusion as a principal concept—the need for people with disabilities to be a part of society, not kept outside and on the fringes—and that the problem is not about the disability but society's attitudinal barriers," she says. "This is all true for the gay rights movement, too.... Gay culture faces a challenge in grappling with the concept of inclusion. We want to be included as part of our society, in terms of legal rights, to be protected against discrimination, to have marriages, adopt children, serve in the military, but we are still terribly hated and discriminated against."

While she decides what to do next in her life, Grimes will continue operating her horse farm on the outskirts of Eugene. "Nature is a very important part of my life. I have been learning about horse training techniques that teach you how to communicate with the horse as the horses do with each other. It's about building partnerships and becoming part of the herd." □

For more information about MOBILITY INTERNATIONAL USA visit the Internet site [www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org).

SUSAN DETROY is a Eugene free-lance writer.

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