

CHARGED WITH CHANGE

Multnomah County's new director of human services faces her challenges with chutzpah

by Timothy Krause

From her seventh-floor corner office, Patricia Pate offers a down-to-earth perspective in her new position as director of Multnomah County's Department of Human Services.

Her no-rocket-science leadership—frequently wrapped in a wicked sense of humor—has led her not only to speak out on the value of crucial social services but also to live and work openly as a lesbian. Although her management skills have developed throughout the course of her career, her sexuality was a part of her character she recognized early on.

"I never had to tell myself or anybody else because I always knew," says Pate, describing her childhood near the Grand Canyon in Arizona. "I remember clearly being very young, driving by a big billboard that had a boy and a girl kissing, and thinking, why would that girl want to kiss a boy? That girl wants to kiss a girl!"

After high school Pate quickly headed for Phoenix, where she worked in the fast food industry until she and her partner at the time decided to seek a cooler place. They spotted Oregon on a map and headed out on a "young and foolish" road trip.

By the time they reached Eugene, the pair knew they had found a new home. They jumped on a plane, flew back to Arizona, packed up everything they owned and moved to Oregon.

"No job, no contacts, no nothing," Pate laughs as she recounts landing another restaurant job followed by her own haircutting business. She later worked on Walter Mondale's presidential campaign, bought another business and, at age 30, entered college.

"I was just nervous as a cat," says Pate, launching a tale about her first class. "I did exactly what I did all through my high school years: slouched in the back row. I plunked my butt down next to this kid who looks over to me and says, 'Aren't you the teacher?'"

Pate thought, "This is where I give in, or this is where I fight." She looked at him and said,



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Patricia Pate already has saved the county more than \$914,000 by eliminating dozens of management positions

"No, I'm the older-than-average student who will wreck the curve for you."

With what would eventually become her characteristic boldness, Pate picked up her things and sat down in the front of the class, determined to get a worthwhile return on her educational investment. She says it was her age, not her sexuality, that set her apart. Within three years, she graduated from Oregon State University with a degree in accounting.

Pate joined Westinghouse in Tri-Cities, Wash., where the company was contracted to clean up the Hanford nuclear site. Proud of her contribution to environmental remediation, she discovered she could apply her management skills to a greater good. She decided then that she wouldn't take another job that didn't have social relevance.

She continued to apply that philosophy as chief financial officer for a Portland investment firm that dealt with low-income housing and at the helm of a social service agency in Corvallis. "It was very clear that this was more than important work," adds Pate. "It was the crux of what it was to be human."

Settling into her new career in social services, Pate met Rhiannon Ashe, with whom she would spend the next six years. When Ashe was diag-

nosed with ovarian cancer, the couple made the difficult decision to move to Northampton, Mass.

Although far from friends, Ashe loved New England, and Northampton was near Boston's leading cancer care facilities. Ashe's condition later worsened, and they returned to Oregon to spend her last days surrounded by loved ones.

Not long after Pate traveled back to Massachusetts to resume her job as director of corporate relations for Smith College, a friend notified her about the Multnomah County position. She hesitated. Her life was now on the East Coast, and she wasn't sure she was ready to return to the place that held so many fragile feelings.

"I really had to think hard about how it would be to come back to Oregon," she says, "to see how it felt emotionally without my Rhiannon."

Pate decided to face the challenge, both personally and professionally. Now 44 and living in an Old Town loft, she won't argue with those who think she's crazy for accepting the position of human services director, arguably a difficult assignment even during better economic times.

"It is a heck of a job," agrees Pate, "but then it's got a heck of a lot of importance, too."

Her department provides critical services

addressing issues of aging and disability; developmental disability; domestic violence; and mental health and addiction. Filling these needs on a restricted budget has challenged Pate in her inaugural months. Her mission has been "to move money as close to the clients as we can get."

One outcome has been the layoff of dozens of executive employees. "I have not replaced them, and I won't," states Pate. "We were too management heavy, and I eliminated those positions. It was an obvious decision."

Obvious, but not easy, and especially risky for a new leader to place her trust in her less experienced junior staff.

"But I'm not paid to avoid risk," she asserts. "I'm paid by the taxpayers of this county to make sure the people we serve get the best service within the tax dollar constraints that we have. Not to protect my job. I'm paid to do the right thing, and I will do the right thing. And that's what I did."

She says the changes she has implemented already have saved the county more than \$914,000. But, in light of uncertain funding from the state, she argues vehemently in support of the county income tax measure on the May 20 ballot. According to Pate, it's no longer a matter of cutting government waste.

"We've all heard those stories, but this department is way beyond cutting fat," she says. "We're now cutting services. We are making decisions that are life-threatening because we don't have the funds."

What receives priority?

"Life, life, life," she answers. "We figure out what's more life-threatening. How can we get our biggest bang for the most clients that help the most for each dollar?"

Even before she began her new position, Pate suspected she would be assuming a role larger than simply an advocate of social services. As the highest-ranking openly gay person among Multnomah County staff, she considered how she might also be looked to as a lesbian role model and community leader.

"Of course I knew it, but I didn't think anyone else would know it," she jokes, humbled at the notion. She reminds herself how much she still needs to learn about specific concerns within Portland's broad sexual minorities community—a task she welcomes as her duty.

"I believe that we all have a responsibility to represent the interests of our community within a broader context," she states firmly. "If there comes something, say, before the commissioners, state or city that touches our community's issues, I will testify. I will use the power that I have been granted by serving in this capacity to create positive change." ■

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