

Which came first?

I was at PSU and I was looking for a place to be," says Carmen Schwisow, a field organizer with Planned Parenthood of the Columbia/Willamette. She joined a group that was organizing the National Young Women's Day of Action. It was Schwisow's introduction to reproductive rights education and activism.

Schwisow, who is 28 years old and graduated with a degree in women's studies and sociology in 1999, says that for her, "It was feminism first, coming out as a lesbian second."

A commitment to feminism is one reason many lesbians and bi women work in reproductive rights organizations. Though difficult to quantify in numbers, the women I spoke with agree that, as Schwisow notes, "It's quite evident whenever you walk into a pro-choice organization, you always find queer women working there."

Maura Roche, a lobbyist for BRO, grew up in a family of progressive activists. Her mother was a member of the Oregon Women's Caucus, while her father was a



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—Maura Roche

leader in the peace movement. "My entire life this whole concept of fighting for the right to privacy...has been a huge focus in my family," says the 37-year-old, who has been instrumental in fighting both anti-gay and anti-choice ballot measures throughout the 1990s and up to the present day.

If ever there were an expert on Lon Mabon and his tactics, it is Roche. She feels "lucky to have figured out a way to combine making a living and doing activism."

Teaming up with Roche and Thorpe to advance progressive bills in the Legislature and battle discriminatory ones is state Sen. Kate Brown. "My first job out of law school was at Portland Feminist Women's Health Circle," says the 44-year-old Brown. "A number of the women there were lesbians. I think it's been really critical to the underpinnings of the women's movement to have [lesbian and straight women] working together."

As an out bi woman, Brown is the only queer in the state Legislature.

"I was pro-choice before I was a lesbian," says Sue Burns, manager of In Other Words Women's Books and Resources. In Other Words has signed on as a supporter of the March for Women's Lives, and Burns hopes to co-sponsor a bus to Washington, D.C., with another feminist organization.

Burns, 33, says she got her start being an animal rights activist and then moved on to pro-choice activism and queer liberation. "My politics depend on the belief that I'm not a lesbian first, I'm not a human first, I'm a female human and I'll go down fighting for my right to do what I want with my female body."

Burns, who lived in New Haven, Conn., and Austin, Texas, before moving to Portland to helm the women's bookstore, says many Portlanders are hip to the interconnectedness of forms of bias. "I think one of the great things about Portland is that the lefty progressive scene is integrated," she says. "It seems like almost all the political dykes I know and meet are multi-issue activists, and pro-choice is included in that...it's very hopeful."

Keep your laws off our bodies

Portland has decades of history behind the collaboration between queer rights and pro-choice groups. In a recent interview with *Just Out*, former Oregon National Abortion Rights Action League executive director and current Multnomah County

Chair Diane Linn said queers offered "dramatic" support to the choice community in the early 1990s. She says she'll "never forget" the financial and political support Right to Privacy (BRO's predecessor) gave at that time.

"Sometimes BRO supporters don't understand why we work with reproductive rights organizations," says Thorpe, noting BRO's membership in the Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon. "I explain to them that we share a belief in the fundamental right to privacy. And we share a common opponent. The religious right targets [queer and pro-choice groups] in the same ways with the same tactics."

Roche has fought this common opponent firsthand for years at the state Capitol. "Many people don't know that Lon Mabon started out on anti-abortion measures," she says.

Mabon was the driving force behind 1990's unsuccessful Measure 8 to ban abortion, and he and the Oregon Citizens Alliance continued to put forth anti-gay and anti-choice measures throughout the '90s, including the infamous Measure 9 in 1992. More



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recently, in 2000, Mabon drafted the Student Protection Act, which would have severely limited sexual education, including crucial HIV education in public schools, had it not been defeated.

"The opposition has a deeper willingness to take anti-environment, anti-choice, anti-gay, anti-death-with-dignity issues and weave them together," says Roche. "Progressives [tend to] segregate our politics. We're very choice oriented."

The irony that progressives' commitment to egalitarian ideals can be an Achilles' heel is not lost on Roche. To combat this, she puts forward a view of "constitutional connectedness" underpinning reproductive, gay and death-with-dignity rights. "[It's about] privacy of the body and...self-

determination in terms of who you build your life with and the quality of your life," she says.

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CHOICE • JUSTICE • ACCESS • HEALTH

MARCH FOR WOMEN'S LIVES


Washington DC April 25, 2004

ABORTION • GLOBAL • FAMILY PLANNING

March for Women's Lives

Pro-choice activists say the time is right for a public demonstration of historic size in support of reproductive freedom and justice for all women. Threats to these rights have never been so systematic and coordinated, and the lives and health of women have never

faced such peril. At 10 a.m. April 25 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., people will march to uphold choice, justice, access, health, abortion, global and family planning.

The principal organizers are the American Civil Liberties Union, Black Women's Health Imperative, Feminist Majority, NARAL Pro-Choice America, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, National Organization for Women and Planned Parenthood Federation of America. 

For more information or to register, call 202-349-3838 or visit www.marchforwomen.org.

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