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**NORTHWEST news**

# OUT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Lesbian vies for a seat in the Oregon Legislature by Kathy Belge

Families are important to Tina Kotek. She's been promoting them for the past three years in Salem as a professional advocate for nonprofits. Now she wants to partner her passion with politics, as she hopes to win a spot as the only out lesbian in the Oregon Legislature.

Like many queer activists, Kotek's first foray into politics came about because of anti-gay discrimination. In 1993 she moved to Bellingham, Wash., following her partner to graduate school. She obtained a job at Western Washington University's Equal Opportunity Office and applied for medical insurance for her partner. Same-sex couples were not covered. After a two-year battle, it was finally decided that the policy was based on state standards and would not be changed. Even though they lost, Kotek says, "It was a very educational process."

Then she moved on to Seattle, this time as a graduate student at University of Washington. There, she and her partner were turned down for married student housing. So, for three years Kotek organized students, rallied and led educational forums and protests so gay and lesbian couples would have the same rights as heterosexual married couples. Their efforts paid off with a change in policy for housing, student health insurance and access to sports facilities. Bit by the activism bug, Kotek moved on and up to president of the graduate student government association. She hasn't looked back since.

"After my third year in grad school, I knew I wasn't going on for my Ph.D. because I was having too much fun being an activist," she says. She moved back to Portland and started working at the Oregon Food Bank as a public policy advocate. She continues to work for low-income families as policy director of Children First for Oregon as she campaigns for the Democratic nomination to represent District 43, which covers inner Northeast Portland.

It's not surprising to hear Kotek say working for children and families will be one of her priorities if elected. "When I say families, I have a broad view. That includes the grandparents that are watching the kids, it includes the single parents, it includes same-sex parents. I'm not saying our families should look a particular way. I'm saying all families should be supported."

She is also aware that the state is facing a billion-dollar deficit and that some kind of tax reform is needed. "The first thing we need to do is amend the kicker law so when the economy is good we can put money aside," she says.

Kotek maintains that state programs must be strengthened to attract business. "Businesses don't want to relocate to Oregon because they



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—Tina Kotek

don't know if our schools are going to be open," she adds. At the same time, she wants to do away with corporate loopholes that let big businesses slip by without contributing more tax dollars.

As someone who has experienced discrimination herself in housing and employment, Kotek ranks nondiscrimination legislation as one of her top goals. "People still lose their jobs because they are gay or lesbian or for gender identity issues," she says.

Kotek supports expanding Oregon's hate crimes law to cover trans people but would prioritize the nondiscrimination bill. "We have to be very strategic about what legislation we bring back this year," she says.

And, of course, she supports same-sex marriage. "It's an equal rights issue," she says. I have a lot of friends who got married. There's a lot of happy people out there."

Kotek believes it's important to have an out lesbian in office. "When you're talking side by side with a legislator on the House floor and they're saying something negative about gays and lesbians, you can say: 'Excuse me, you're talking about me. You're talking about my family. You're talking about my community.' It's

much more difficult to do something that could hurt a community if you know someone from that community," she says.

Kotek has received endorsements from Basic Rights Oregon, the Service Employees International Union, Oregonians for Schools and the National Abortion Rights Action League Pro-Choice Oregon. Queer supporters include state Sen. Kate Brown, former state Rep. Gail Shibley and activists Bill Dickey and Dick Levy.

Kotek's opponent is Chip Shields, executive director and founder of Better People, a living-wage employment and counseling organization for people who have been in trouble with the law. He has scored endorsements from gay leaders Sam Adams and Terry Bean.

Kotek thinks her inside experience at the Capitol makes her the best candidate. "It's so important to have good representation in Salem. State government touches every aspect of people's lives," she says. "It's really important to have people who are educated, who understand policy, who know how to work and build coalition on important issues. As an advocate, I've always told people, 'If you want to advocate for change, you have to run for office.' I finally decided to put my money where my mouth was." □

For more information about TINA KOTEK visit [www.votetina.com](http://www.votetina.com).

KATHY BELGE is a Portland free-lance writer.