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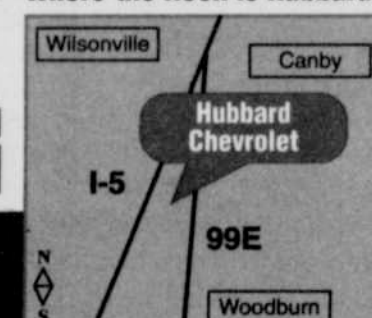
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## NORTHWEST news

# WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

The story behind a gay septuagenarian's picture reveals a life filled with love, loss and legacy by Tom Stevenson

It was a simple photograph, one of many depicting the scene as gay and lesbian couples stood in line to receive their marriage licenses from Multnomah County. The picture, which appeared in the March 5 edition of *Just Out*, showed a lone man holding a sign reading: "Congratulations! 54 years ago I would have been in line with YOU. With luck I may be in line in 2004, too!"

As often is the case, there was more—much more—to the story than met the eye. The photo is of Nelson L. Jones, a youthful 74-year-old gay man who has called Portland home for the past six years. His story includes a wildly successful career as a schoolteacher, a 41-year love affair with another man in the heart of conservative rural Oregon, a successful record in business and the joy of finding love again the latter part of one's life. And that is only the beginning.

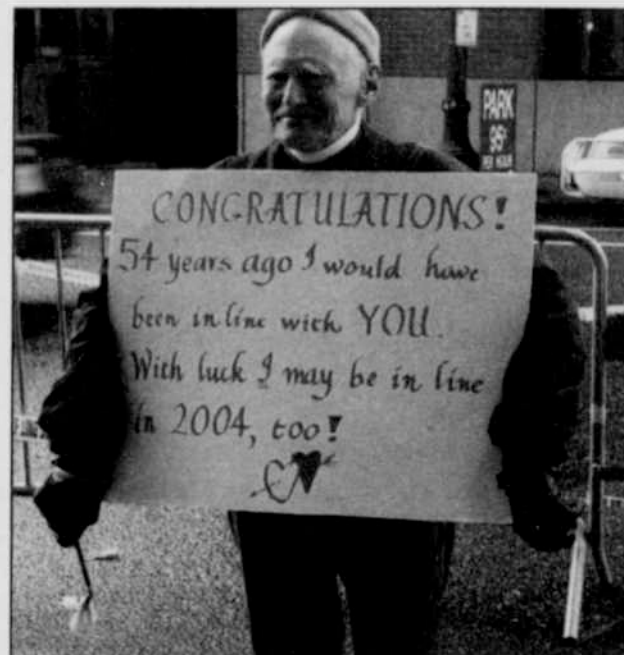
Jones held the sign that day in part to recognize those who were standing in line and in part to celebrate. "I was seeing things happening that I never dreamed I would see in my lifetime," he says.

Jones' story begins in a small town in southeastern Kansas. He says he was just like any other child in the era, beginning work at age 9 as a folder at the local newspaper. Through his high school years he worked at a grocery store as well as a battery and tire place, ran a printing press and jerked sodas, saving his money for college.

He went on to graduate from a Texas college in 1957 and serve in the U.S. Air Force. While in the military he had one of the highest security clearances. It was around this time that he met Jack H. Swearingen, the man who would be his lover and soul mate for 41 years, so he learned to live quietly with the fear of being discovered as a gay man.

The couple soon loaded up their 1957 Chevrolet station wagon and made their way to the West Coast, where Swearingen, who held graduate degrees in English, philosophy and economics, had found a job as a professor at University of Oregon.

Before leaving they had taken a road map and placed a quarter on Eugene, and inside the circle



Nelson L. Jones celebrates same-sex marriage March 5 outside the Multnomah Building

was the area Jones would look for his own teaching job. In addition to earning degrees in both chemistry and physics, he had also received his teaching certificate. He found a job at Sweet Home High School, where he would deliver chemistry and physics lessons for 25 years and receive the "Teacher of the Year" honor several times.

The couple took a year to get acclimated to life in Oregon, with Jones making the long 50-mile commute between Eugene and Sweet Home. (That was in the days before the freeway.) Swearingen then decided he wanted to buy a small farm—despite the fact neither had any farm experience—and it was Jones who finally found a place less than a mile from Brownsville, which is located between Sweet Home and Eugene. It was, at the time, far from being the place of their dreams.

"Jack took one look at it and said, 'Absolutely no way,'" Jones says with a laugh. "But he knew a wealthy woman in Eugene who had bought a lot of real estate, and she went out to look at the farm. She told Jack that if he didn't buy it, he would regret it for the rest of his life."

They purchased the 130 acres of land and the "so-called house" that sat on it. Jones says



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Jones (left) was in a committed relationship with Jack H. Swearingen for 41 years

