

Under editor Gail Kimberling's leadership, Lincoln City's weekly paper, *The News Guard*, was appreciated for its even-handed coverage, which included queer issues. She realized that good journalism often requires discussing topics that make some people uncomfortable.

Kimberling led *The News Guard* to honor gay men Rick Brissette and Dan Beck as 2002's Couple of the Year, an honor the paper had bestowed for a quarter-century. "That was a first for Lincoln City for sure, and the couple got a standing ovation at the event where it was announced."

Kimberling's family moved to Lincoln City from California when she was in her freshman year of high school. She earned a degree in psychology from Oregon State University, married her high school sweetheart and returned with him to the coast to raise four children. She had always been involved in creative writing and journalism.

She witnessed some homophobia at the small high school she attended, but in her class the gay kids seemed to blend in with everyone else. And despite a strict Catholic upbringing, sensitivity to queer equality came surprisingly easily to her.

"I guess I have just gotten to know gay people in this area, and they are just people—they are great people," she says. "When it came to covering their issues, it wasn't because I had an agenda or a sole purpose in mind. It was just because it was the right thing to do."

After Kimberling's third year at *The News Guard*, history was made in San Francisco and Multnomah County when same-sex couples got married.

"When we learned that quite a few couples from our little corner of the state had traveled to Multnomah County and to San Francisco,

'IT WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO'

Heterosexual newspaper editor loses job after expressing support for marriage equality by Michael Burdick

I thought, my gosh, this is a story! And about that time there was a reception held for all of these couples. So I brought my feature writer with me, and we attended their reception.... We took a photo and put it on the front page the following week.

"I wrote an accompanying editorial with it saying, gosh, you know, this is amazing, this is just history before our eyes. I didn't hear anything except for positive letters, which just poured in."

Her bosses apparently weren't as pleased with the articles. The head editor, Joe Happ, published an opinion piece criticizing Kimberling by name for biased and inappropriate coverage and expressing "how disappointed he was in me and how bad and how poorly edited it was." Among other things he argued that she should have focused more on the fact that Lincoln County was not issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

Kimberling was shocked by Happ's response and surmises that he bowed to pressure from a small group of religious leaders. "It was hard, but I figured I'd been here a long time. I felt what I did was appropriate, and it was right."

Soon, Kimberling saw the writing on the wall. "Shortly after his piece appeared, I learned that he was advertising for my job without telling me, and then I was pretty much given an ultimatum: 'Sign this agreement or leave.'"

The agreement was to have all of her work subject to the approval of the head editor. "I refused to sign the agreement, so I was terminated on the spot."

Publisher Kathleen Newton insists that Kimberling was not fired because of her support for marriage equality.

"We really are not able to discuss private personnel issues," she told *Just Out*. "I can't comment on why she's no longer with the newspaper. I can tell you there is a lot of misinformation out there. But none of our relationships or decision-making—hers or anybody else's—they're not related to a single incident."

With Kimberling's husband working and youngest child having left for basic training in the Air Force only a week earlier, suddenly not having a job was tough. "I went through the...grieving, being mad, kind of the loss. I'm still proud of what I did; I can hold my head up in town. And I would do it all again."

Luckily, after only two weeks of unemployment, Kimberling learned of an open position



Gail Kimberling received the Human Rights Campaign's Equality Award in 2002 for her fair treatment of queers

as managing editor at *The Newport News-Times*, where she had previously put in nine years as a reporter. It is a bigger paper than *The News Guard*, covering all of Newport County, and she is enjoying her new job. "I landed in a better place and a better work environment."

Kimberling still subscribes to *The News Guard* because it's important to her to stay current with local news.

When pressed on how it could have been so easy for her to accept marriage for gays despite growing up with and continuing to practice Catholicism, Kimberling acknowledges the church's teachings against homosexuality. But her explanation is simple.

"You see straight couples all the time with marriages going haywire and the kids who suffer and the couples who suffer. When I see that commitment between the

gay couples—you know they've been through hurdles to get there and then to make that further commitment takes another huge leap. This is for real; we can take a lesson from it."

MICHAEL BURDICK is a recent graduate of Reed College. He can be reached at mike@nibblicious.com.



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