

All in the Family

Parents of gay sons face off in race for Oregon Legislature

by Meg Daly

Tim Duerfeldt adamantly opposes Measure 36. Donna Nelson steadfastly supports it.

Duerfeldt and Nelson are vying for the position of state representative for District 24. Nelson, a Republican, is the incumbent. Both she and her Democratic opponent are longtime, devoted members of their community and churches. Both have adult gay sons whom they love. They differ, however, on how to protect their children's rights.

"This measure doesn't belong in the constitution," says Duerfeldt, speaking from his

home in McMinnville. The unassuming, bright-eyed 60-year-old spent 34 years as a teacher at Dayton Junior/Senior High School. He helped bring recycling to the county, built homes with Habitat for Humanity and was a foster parent with his wife, Emily, to dozens of children.

"It's taking away rights...and any people who are deprived need to be supported" and not further deprived, he says of the amendment that would ban marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples.

Duerfeldt had an early education on same-sex unions. He says his son Greg received an unsigned certificate from Benton County to marry his partner, Jonathon Berliner, in 1991. The couple were given a ceremony at First Baptist Church, where the elder Duerfeldt is still a member.

Now 35, Greg Duerfeldt lives and works as chef in Shanghai, China. (He could not be reached for comment for this article.) He and Berliner have since separated amicably. Berliner is executive director of the Maui AIDS Foundation in Hawaii.

Nelson's gay son, J Graigory, remembers Greg from McMinnville High, where they acted in plays together. Graigory remembers well hearing that Greg had come out and applied for a marriage license a few years after high school.

"It was really cool when he came out," says

Graigory. "He had been a big man on campus."

The fact that one of the "popular" kids from high school had gone public with his sexual orientation meant a great deal to Graigory, who says he had been more on the fringe. Unlike Greg, whose family reportedly embraced him when he talked to them about being gay at age 12, Graigory grew up feeling mortally ashamed of his sexual orientation. "I was raised Baptist with a damning God," he says.

Believing that his family and community would never accept him, he attempted suicide at age 12 by downing a bottle of pills, cutting his wrists with an X-Acto knife and stabbing himself in the throat.

He survived and says he "found a lot of other ways of escaping life until I could move away. I didn't recognize then that I was exactly as I was meant to be."

Now he works in Los Angeles as a writer's assistant for *Queer as Folk*.

"I'm 33 and gorgeous," he says. "I'm happy with who I am."

Graigory's mother says she loves her son. She says her support for Measure 36 isn't the attack on him he thinks it is.

"I'm sad," Nelson told *Just Out*. "When I first talked with my son, he thought [the measure] was a hate crime. I said, 'Don't go there.'"

Raised in Texas, Nelson has traveled the world with various humanitarian organizations. The single mother is a proud member of Right to Life and has sponsored legislation that would ban late-stage abortion. She says she "doesn't have any hate cells" in her body. Rather, she sees Measure 36 as "a restatement of what's in our constitution."

Article 1, Section 20 of the Oregon Constitution states: "No law shall be passed granting to any citizen or class of citizens privileges or immunities which, upon the same terms, shall not equally belong to all citizens."

Nelson, however, does not see current marriage law as discriminatory, nor does she consider the proposed amendment to be a change in the law.



Donna Nelson says she loves her son even though she does not support his right to marry

"If this were regarded as some type of discrimination...or hate bill...then I'd support him," she says.

Graigory, who vigorously opposes the measure and has volunteered for John Kerry's presidential campaign, says his mother hasn't gone far enough in supporting him.

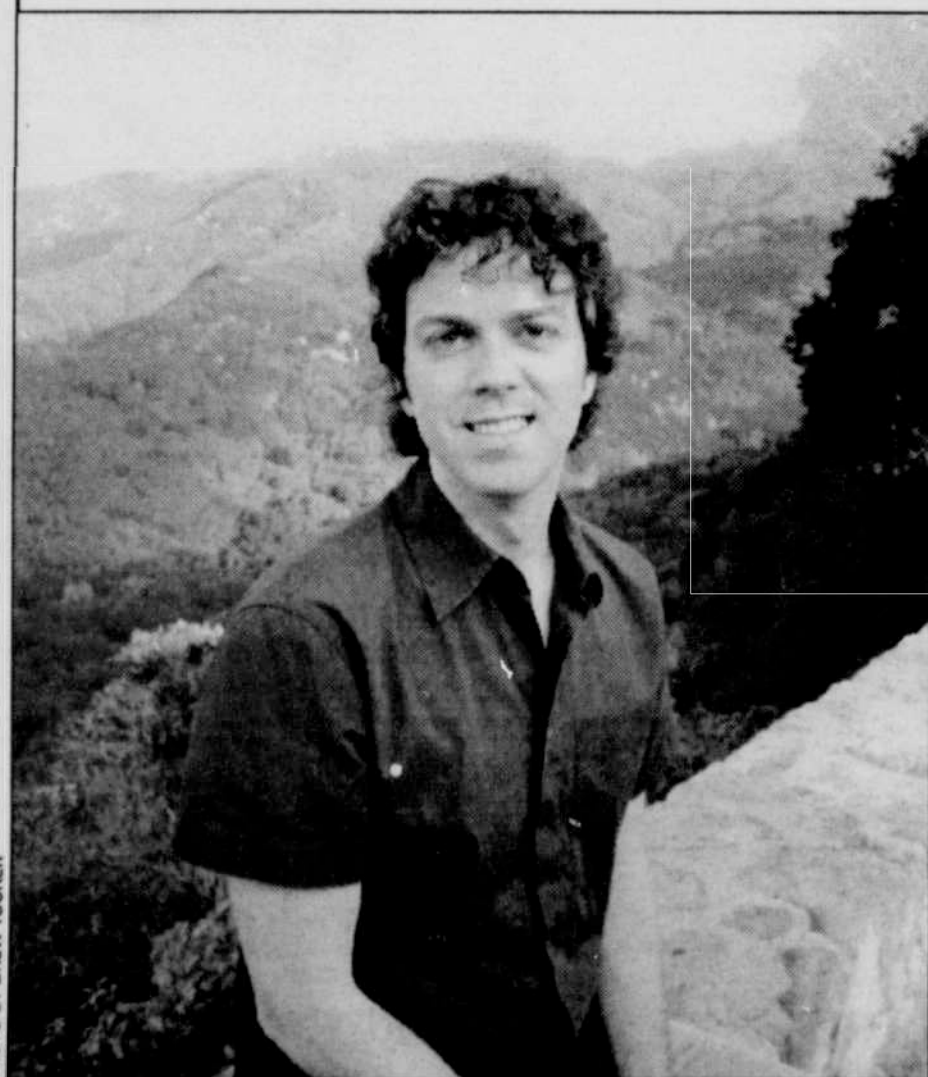
"Why haven't you introduced any parity legislation?" he wonders. "Why would you not want your own son to have the same rights and responsibilities as your own daughter?"

But even parity legislation, such as a civil union bill, might never come into being, according to Rebekah Kassell, spokeswoman for the No on 36 campaign.

"The proponents of this

"Passing this amendment dims any real hope of civil unions"

—Rebekah Kassell



J Graigory tried to commit suicide as a gay preteen but now loves himself for who he is