

NORTHWEST news

NORMAN (GENDERQUEER) ROCKWELL

Silverton's cross-dressing city official

by Meg Daly

Stu Rasmussen is the kind of woman who could stop traffic—and he knows it.

The leggy, 56-year-old redhead is sitting across from me at a cafe table overlooking Silver Falls in Silverton. Dressed in a miniskirt, tall black boots and cleavage-revealing black top, Rasmussen's appearance invites head-turning. And that is just how he likes it.

"I like to have fun, and it just happens to involve being me," says the Silverton native. He waves to a group of jeans-clad women sitting nearby. They return his neighborly hello.

Most everybody in Silverton knows Stu Rasmussen. The co-owner of the Palace Theater has been a city official numerous times in the past two decades—four years as mayor, eight years on the City Council—and he was just elected to one of the City Council's three open seats for 2005-2008.

The former software engineer calls himself a fiscal conservative and social liberal. Once a proponent of growth in economically flailing 1980s Silverton, now he's a voice for "turning off the spigot" on growth. At the same time Rasmussen was trading in his plaid work shirts for heels and ruby-colored jewelry, his hometown was transitioning from timber to art galleries and antiques for its sense of self. So many people have moved to Silverton in recent years, it is reaching capacity for its sewer and water systems.

Rasmussen says he has been a cross-dresser all his life, though he has only been out for the past 10 years. For many years he was ashamed; he thought he was the only man in the world with a proclivity for women's clothing and therefore must be "sick and bad." Then an Internet search revealed a much wider world to him and, he says, "the floodgates opened."

He found his way to Northwest Gender Alliance, which he credits with helping him get to a place of being comfortable with himself. In the mid-1990s he started getting his nails done and was soon going out in public dressed entirely in women's attire. Though he was terrified at first, he soon realized "90 percent of the problems [he faced] were right between my own ears."

Rather than being ostracized from his community, he instead found acceptance. There were the occasional snickers behind his back, but for the most part Silverton embraced him as they always had—as one of their own and as a trusted leader.

"People get over the package really fast when they discover the person is competent," he says.

In fact, he sees an advantage to being a cross-dressing politician in a small town because "everybody knows everybody" and because longtime residents do not, ironically, judge peers by their appearance.

When I press him for what is unique about Silverton that makes it so open-minded, he shrugs it off.

"This is something that could be done anywhere," he says. "People are people everywhere." Not that he doesn't think Silverton is special.

"I think it says a lot about this town that I'd come in second for City Council," he says.

What Rasmussen loves about his town is its Norman Rockwell feel. He says people live in Silverton for its small-town values of community involvement, neighborly caretaking and involvement in public schooling. As a city councilor, he has pledged to maintain a "home-town lifestyle."

Part of that lifestyle for Rasmussen has meant nearly 30 years with his life partner, Victoria Sage. They met when she was working at the snack bar of a Portland cinema and he did maintenance on the projector. Though they have never married, Rasmussen calls Sage "the love of my life."

While Sage had always been comfortable with Rasmussen's cross-dressing, the decidedly heterosexual Rasmussen was happy to discover that other women find him attractive as well.

"They are really attracted to my feminine side," he says. "They know when we get together we're not just going to watch football. We're



Silverton City Council member Stu Rasmussen outside the Palace Theater

going to go shopping and talk about something real."

Comfortable with the terms genderqueer and transgender, he says he has nonetheless never considered having a sex change.

"I can be perfectly happy in a man's body," he says.

He did, however, save up his money and get breast implants four years ago.

"Cleavage is a cross-dresser's nirvana," he says. He had worn prosthetic breasts for a few years to "try out being a guy with breasts." Now that he has the real thing, he says he has regretted it "for all of about 15 seconds" when he first opened his eyes after the surgery.

One of his favorite adornments for his bust is a T-shirt he had made that answers any silent passersby who may be wondering, "Why does Stu do that?" It reads simply: "Because girls have more fun." 

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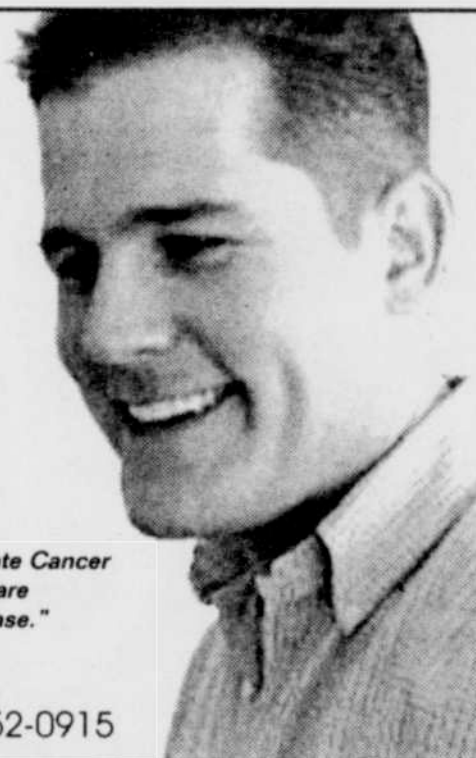
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