

Our years with Vera



Her advocacy, her legacy by Pat Young

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus sang at Mayor Vera Katz's final open house at City Hall. It was fitting that they sang goodbye to her, since they also sang to welcome her as Portland's mayor 12 years earlier.

Vera Katz has a long history of supporting the gay community of Oregon, beginning in 1973 when she and Steve Kafoury sponsored the first gay rights bill in the state Legislature. The bill ultimately failed, but Katz was always a visible supporter as new ones were introduced.

"She was everybody's Jewish mother, and we desperately needed one in the movement at that time," says Susie Shepherd, a lesbian who was active with the Portland Town

Council, a gay rights organization in the 1970s.

Katz and Kafoury were part of a handful of political and public figures who dared to support gay rights in the early '70s. They were joined in this fight by Frank Roberts, Stevie Remington and later Gretchen Kafoury. But for the longest time, remembers Shepherd, it was just the two of them.

"At the very beginning, when our earth was still cooling, it was Vera," says Shepherd. "Her door was always open, whether it was her office door in Salem or the front door to her home in Portland. There were so few people to talk to and so little help that any support we got was

just huge. It was so greatly appreciated when we were such total strangers in Salem and the concept of gay rights was still so strange for everybody."

It was the 1970s, after all, a time when *The Oregonian* was still refusing to advertise meetings for the organization Parents of Gays. They told Shepherd's mother, Ann—who co-founded Portland's chapter, which later grew into Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—that it was a family newspaper and that they didn't use that word. And here they were, a group of gay activists wanting to talk to the Legislature about equal rights—to seriously discuss discrimination in housing, public accom-

modations and employment. Katz was ready to help.

"She would say: 'Susie, have your mother talk to so-and-so. She can give them the mother's standpoint. Larry [Copeland of the Portland Town Council], you go and talk to so-and-so because they won't even listen to a woman, but they might listen to a man a little bit,'" says Shepherd. "She knew who to talk to and who should talk to whom."

"We could not have gotten the start we had without her," notes Shepherd. "There was no earthly way. She gave us balance. We learned to laugh. We learned to work. We learned to give back to those who gave to us."

From left, Katz at a No on 9 function, 1991; Katz leads AIDS Walk 03; Katz in 2002; Northwest Gender Alliance honors Katz, 2002

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