

Lifelong activist Betsy Leondar-Wright tapped into a hot-button issue when she noticed class divisions in social activist communities. As a middle-class lesbian, she sometimes learned the hard way that elitism is present in these circles. She teaches workshops on the subject, convinced that all marginalized groups benefit from unity.

Leondar-Wright, author of *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists*, recently spoke with *Just Out* about strength in solidarity and the little things privileged people do to piss off the working class.

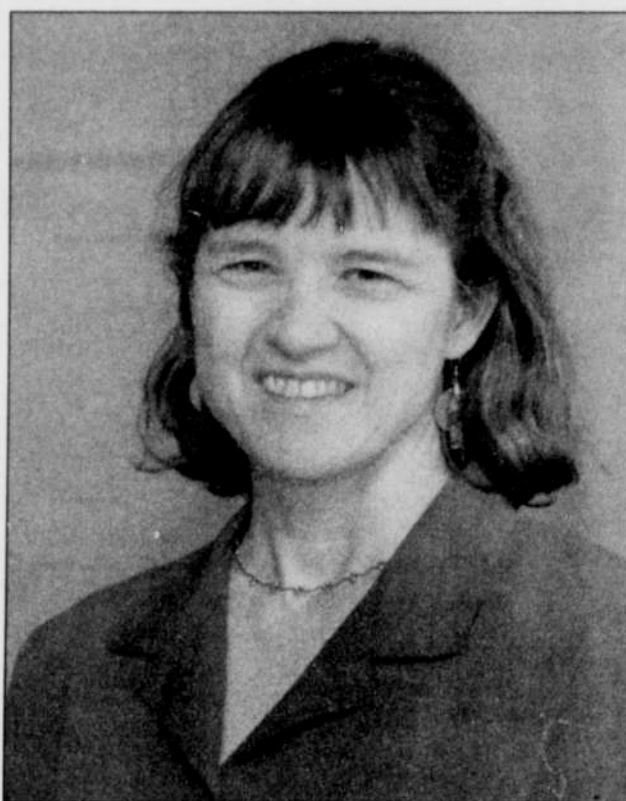
Jaymee R. Cuti: What compelled you to write this book?

Betsy Leondar-Wright: Over 25 years of activist experience, I kept noticing that membership groups tended to recruit members with similar education and income levels and that coalitions tended to split along class lines. It seemed that we could have more clout if we learned to work together.

JRC: What has prepared you to tackle the topic of class and activism?

BLW: When I was 21, I joined a national network of activists just when working-class people in the group were getting fed up and staging a revolt. Many of them were seasoned veterans of the civil rights and anti-war movements, and they found my wave of college-educated new members terribly entitled,

self-indulgent and flighty. I got some very pointed advice from these older working-class activists. For example, if you're working part-time voluntarily so that you can be an activist or an artist or a student, don't pay a low amount on a sliding scale; pay according to your earning potential, and leave the subsidies for involuntarily poor people. Another thing they taught me is not to make unnecessary messes and leave them for working people to clean up.



Betsy Leondar-Wright says a diverse cross section of people should set the queer agenda.

JRC: What can readers take from this book to use in their own work?

BLW: One theme is to talk less and listen more. Apparently middle-class activists often

come across as domineering knowing-it-all. Another is to use your privilege for the common good, instead of hiding it or hogging it. If you have a vacation home, offer it for a group retreat; if

you have contacts in the governor's office, call on them for improvements in the poorest neighborhood. And of course give away as much money as you can afford to groups with limited resources.

JRC: How do you see classism affecting the queer community?

BLW: In reality, there are queer people of every class and race, but you'd never know it from looking at the mainstream media depic-

tions of us. Gay men's culture has been equated in some circles with expensive consumer goods.

When the agenda is set by a diverse cross section of queers, then it includes many working-class issues such as access to health care, "don't ask, don't tell" rules in the military and services for homeless LGBT youth kicked out by their families. But when the agenda is set by the most privileged gay people, it seems as if all would be peachy if only we could get married.

I'm very enthusiastic about same-sex marriage rights—I got legally married to my partner of 14 years last year, and I do think marriage will erode the prejudice against us—but there are many other aspects to fighting homophobia besides winning marriage rights.

JRC: What sort of reaction have you received from *Class Matters*?

BLW: I can tell I've hit a nerve. Whenever I put up interactive survey questions on my Web site [the latest being, "What's the most classist comment you ever heard?"], I get a flood of stories. I think the issue of class is bubbling up all over. 

BETSY LEONDAR-WRIGHT will read from *Class Matters* 7:30 p.m. June 23 at Annie Bloom's Books, 7834 S.W. Capitol Highway (free), and will teach a workshop for community service providers from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. June 24 (contact Technical Assistance for Community Services at 503-239-4001 to register) and a workshop on "Building Stronger Cross-Class Alliances" from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. June 25 at First Unitarian Church, 1011 S.W. 12th Ave. (\$5-\$100 sliding scale). For more information visit www.classmatters.com.

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Oregon Democrats Celebrate Pride Month

Join the GLBT Caucus of the Democratic Party of Oregon as we organize and continue to lead on advancing pro-equality legislation on our community's quest for equality under the law.

- Visit our table at Gay Pride and sign up.
- Join us at our organizational meeting on Saturday, June 18th at 2 pm. 232 NE 9th Avenue in Portland.

Membership is free and open to any Oregonian who wishes to participate in the GLBT Caucus and is registered to vote. For additional information contact DPO State Central Committee member Frank Dixon at 503 242-3585 or fdixon@hevanet.com

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