

northwest

Under Construction

Activist builds a successful life through his love for a city.

by Malka Geffen

From Bob Ball's headquarters in the Pearl District, you can see the Wyatt growing into the 15-story residential community of a real estate investor's dreams. Ball specializes in converting historic Portland buildings into modern realities. Since 1996, he has given new life to treasures like the American, the Marshall-Wells Lofts, the Embassy and the Avenue Lofts in the historic Meier & Frank warehouse. A young gay entrepreneur, Ball is the definition of a self-made man.

Raised by a single mom in the small town of Knappa, Ball recalls how growing up under tough financial circumstances affected his future. "I remember waiting in line for cheese blocks and cans of beans," he said. "After I came out, I saw how lonely I was and that I didn't experience things normal teens get to experience. It made me want to bust out and work hard and meet people and forge a positive life for myself."

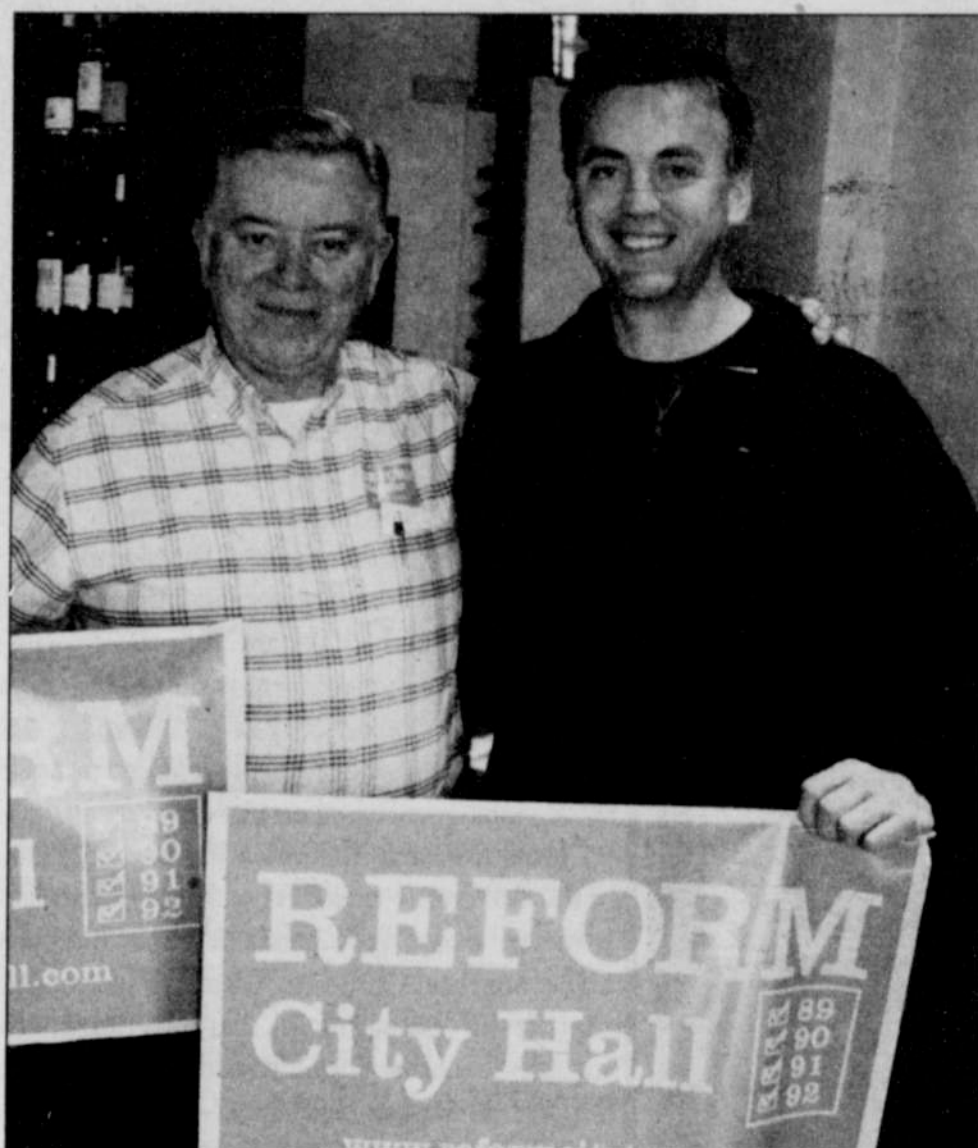
While attending University of Oregon, Ball bused tables, saved money and, with a friend, put a down payment on a small house in Eugene. He learned to fix it up and rent it out before going on to buy a few more. At one point, Ball says he was going to school, working at a small computer software startup and managing 14 properties. After some students approached him about a study on the presence of safe spaces for gay community lowering the rates of HIV incidence, he opened the Empowerment Project, which he says was the first gay community center in Eugene and possibly Oregon.

"But my heart was here in Portland," says Ball, who visited his father in the Rose City while growing up and had begun buying apartment buildings in town while living in Eugene. After moving into one of his own buildings, Ball was held up at gunpoint outside.

"Not long before, a community policing office opened nearby, and I took a volunteer application," he says. "Then I suddenly thought, 'That's a good issue.' Actually, it was a traumatic thing to have happen."

As a Portland Police Bureau reserve officer, Ball coordinated community policing offices, put in some 8,000 hours on the street and was the second openly gay officer on the force at the time. In 2002, he won the Police Medal for showing valor in a dangerous situation. Ball and two paid officers disarmed a man who was holding a woman hostage at knifepoint.

You might be able to catch a glimpse of Ball mentoring queer youth during his early-morning coffee run or you might simply see



Mayor Tom Potter (left) appreciates the contributions of Bob Ball to the city of Portland.

his name on a wall at places like Q Center, to which he donated \$25,000. Watching the classic and the modern combine in the creation of the Wyatt—named after his mentor, former U.S. Rep. Wendell Wyatt, R-Ore.—anyone can see Ball in his newest stamp on the city.

"I have done more historic renovation than anyone in the state, with over \$100 million in project value in historic properties," Ball says. "When I drive over the Fremont Bridge, I think, 'Wow, I saved those things!'"

Mayor Tom Potter says: "I'm a big fan of Bob's, not just for the work he is doing today to reform city government, but his commitment through the years to all of Portland. Bob is a role model for people who love their community and want to be involved in making it better. He has spent thousands of hours as a police volunteer, as a neighborhood volunteer and as a founder and contributor to the Q Center. As a businessman, Bob has saved historic buildings like the Marshall-Wells and Meier & Frank warehouse, keeping the spirit and history of Portland intact. Portland is a better place because Bob is here." jo

A Look at Charter Reform

You take the good, you take the bad

Portland is aflutter with talk of city charter reform. What is it? Who cares? Bob Ball cares.

After a unanimous City Council vote in 2005, an independent panel of citizens was appointed to look at the charter, which was ratified in 1913. Ball is among the 26 volunteers who spent 14 months listening to elected officials, bureau directors, academic experts and citizen testimony at more than 100 public meetings about its viability.

"While working in the police bureau, I saw things that could be improved, and it hit me that we could do some things to improve citizens' access to city government and its responsibility to deliver services," Ball says. In 2002, he worked to put the "Good Government Initiative" on the ballot—the city's last attempt to reconsider its "weak mayor" structure.

As it stands, Portland's city government combines the legislative, executive and quasi-judicial functions in a five-member commission, including the mayor. One aspect of the charter reform, up for election May 15, would centralize authority under a chief administrative officer appointed by the mayor.

According to Ball, the package proposed by the review commission would increase communication and coordination while eliminating duplication between bureaus. "We found that average citizens don't know how to access City Hall," he says.

Ball argues that people's concerns can get tossed from bureau to bureau, citing an example in which it took seven months to fix a broken pipe. "Someone may go to Sam [Adams] about a transportation issue, but if he doesn't help or agree, you're done. That's your one access point," Ball explains. He says a chief administrative officer setting up systems to respond to all complaints equally would improve access.

Ball says the proposed charter reform would also increase city government's accountability. "Now commissioners are not holding each other accountable. A mess-up goes untalked about because they don't want the return treatment."

City Commissioner Erik Sten considers Ball a friend and says he appreciates his support for publicly financed elections. According to Sten, proponents of change have not proven their case that the city is not working well under the current system. "I think it concentrates too much power in one office, and it has nothing to do with Potter or Ball, should he run for mayor," Sten says.

Portland might be the last remaining big city with a commission form of government, but Sten says having five people working directly on projects and making things happen is part of why the city is so successful. "If you have a city that's doing well by most estimates, I think that you should be careful before tossing it out."

Sten says a change would create huge opportunity costs and be the City Council's focus for the next four to five years. He adds that the debate has been fun. "Some issues are ethical; this isn't one of those. We'll survive and persist under either form. I just think we're risking a lot more to change than stick with known success," he says. jo

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