

guest commentary

by Sam Adams

Same Bill, Different Wrapping

Oregon's same-sex domestic partners see end to discrimination

Within the next month, Oregon will make history and send a message of equality across the entire nation. The Oregon Legislature is poised to pass two pieces of legislation that are vital to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Oregonians and our families. The first is the Oregon Equality Act, Senate Bill 2, which will finally create a consistent statewide law banning discrimination against the LGBT community. No longer will a person legally be fired from their job, denied a room at a hotel or refused service at a restaurant just because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Vera Katz, my friend and mentor, first introduced this legislation in 1973. After 34 years of trying, legal discrimination against LGBT Oregonians will come to an end this year.

And that's not the end of it. The Legislature is expected also to end the discrimination that same-sex couples face every single day because we are denied access to legal recognition of our relationships.

The Oregon Family Fairness Act, House Bill 2007, would create a new, statewide domestic partner law that grants us and our partners all of the protections, rights and responsibilities under state law that straight couples can access through marriage.

When first introduced, it was called "civil unions." This is the term they use in Vermont. Then last week, out lesbian Rep. Tina Kotek, D-North Portland, proposed an amendment. The bill will now be called "domestic partnerships"—like California's law.

I have to admit, at first I was confused. Why change the name? The name civil union just seemed more "official" to me somehow—like we were getting real government sanction of our relationships...and I wondered whether we were giving something up by changing the name for this package of 500-plus rights. Are we ceding ground to our opposition?

After some soul searching, and quite a few conversations with friends, I believe the answer is no—we're not giving up a thing, nor are we ceding one inch of ground to the opposition. I've decided that Tina's amendment makes perfect sense. Here's why:

Same package, different wrapping: House Bill 2007 will grant same-sex couples and our families more than 500 protections, rights and responsibilities—the exact same rights whether you call it a civil union or a domestic partnership. There's zero change. And let's not forget that this is historic—no other state has ever passed such comprehensive rights after the voters enacted a ban on same-sex marriage.

Domestic partner is *our* language. Over the past 30 years we claimed the word "partner" and gave it a new meaning. We created a definition for our relationships when "wife" or "husband" was not accurate or available. We passed domestic partnership registries and fought with employers to grant domestic partnership benefits for our partners and our children. We introduced our partners to our families and neighbors. Our siblings and parents have

adopted the word partner to describe our families. We gave meaning to this word—so let's use it. To act in any other way minimizes the meaning of our partnerships and the struggles we have fought for and won over the past three decades.

Our opponents have language, too—it's called "reciprocal benefits." Our opponents want to undermine our relationships, our partnerships, by creating a category called "reciprocal benefits." It is nothing like a domestic partnership or a civil union. They are uncomfortable with recognizing our partnerships as loving, committed relationships. Instead, Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, and others have proposed "reciprocal benefits," which would grant a small number of rights, based not on the devotion of two loving partners, but based on a fiction that makes our opponents more comfortable. This is a clear attempt to avoid giving our loving relationships the status they deserve, and it is unacceptable.

Our opponents will attempt to take these rights away as soon as they're signed into law. Our opponents will not rest while we celebrate this victory, nor will the fight end when the bills pass in the Legislature. The Oregon Family Council, the organization that brought us Measure 36, will collect the signatures to put domestic partnerships—and our rights—on the ballot. They'll work night and day to take these rights away with an indecent campaign.

I'm in this for the long haul. I don't want to see the Legislature finally enact these essential rights, only to lose them at the ballot. So my vote is for doing anything and everything to make sure that the opposition fails in any attempt to take our hard-fought rights away.

House Bill 2007 uses language that accurately describes our relationships. It's *our* language and gives us the protections, rights and responsibilities under state law that are available through marriage contracts. It's language that is understandable to all Oregonians, which will be incredibly important when our rights are put to the voters by our opposition.

Oregon is about to become the first state in the country to win legal recognition of our relationships after passing a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. And we're going to win a more comprehensive set of rights than either Washington or California, who have long been seen as leaders in this fight. It started with our fight for Senate Bill 1000, continued with the GLBT community's and Basic Rights Oregon's work to elect a pro-fairness majority and continues through this legislative session, where that majority and BRO have worked tirelessly to encourage broad support for the bills, ensure that the committees hear our families' compelling stories and think both strategically and proactively.

We will never have full equality until the federal government recognizes our relationships and we have protections in every state. But in Oregon, domestic partnerships will provide our community the protections for our relationships and our families that we have been fighting for. 10

SAM ADAMS is Portland's first openly gay city commissioner.

reflections

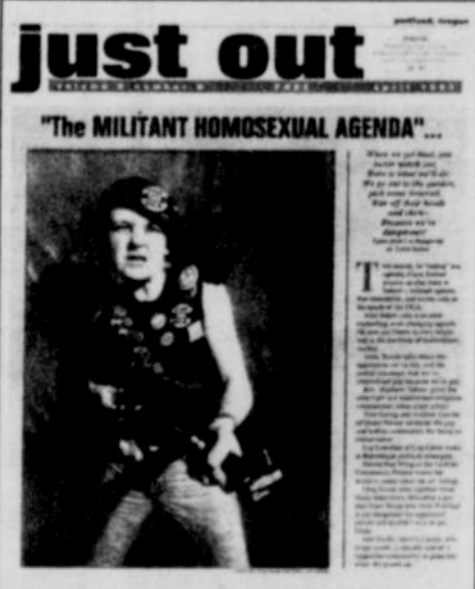
15 Years Ago in *Just Out*... volume 9 number 6, april 1992

- The first-ever New Jersey Gay Pride Parade is set for June 6 in Asbury Park. Among other accomplishments, the New Jersey Lesbian and Gay Coalition will be celebrating its success at getting an amendment passed to New Jersey's anti-discrimination law to protect gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

- There's a new face over at Phoenix Rising these days. Valerie Whittlesey, of French/English/Russian-dissident ancestry, is the new executive director.

- Queer Nation activists protested the Portland opening of *Basic Instinct*. The film features a man-hating lesbian psychopath who kills with an ice pick. This sparked a nationwide outcry against Hollywood's homophobic stereotypes.

- Sanford Director died of congestive heart failure March 19 in his Southwest Portland home. He was 54. Proclaimed "Portland's Gay Mayor" by Chester



"Esther" Brinker, he used his title to be the welcoming ambassador for our community and to do a lot of good. It would take a 10-volume set of books to recount Director's contributions to our community. He was "Queen of the Queens," and his energy, vision and commitment will be greatly missed.

- Marlon Riggs, producer and director of the internationally acclaimed documentary *Tongues Untied*, a powerful and poetic exploration of the African-American gay male experience, will be in Portland on May 1 to premiere his award-winning documentary *Color Adjustment*.

- The lesbian feature film *Claire of the Moon*, produced by Demi-Monde Productions, will premiere May 28 at Fox Theater in Portland.

- Shirley Maclaine stormed out of the British Film Awards on Jan. 27 and joined gays on the sidewalk who were protesting the anti-gay and anti-people-with-AIDS editorial stance of The London Evening Standard, which sponsors the ceremony.

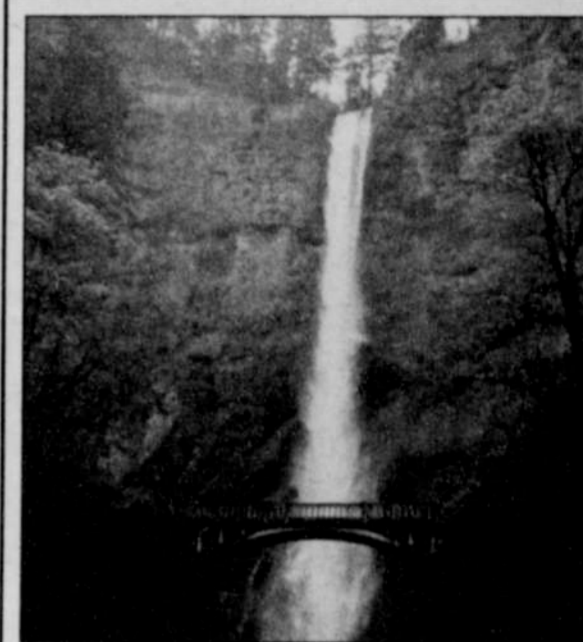
- Gail Shibley and Jerry Keene, two candidates for the Oregon House of Representatives, will be among three others to benefit from the Victory Fund, the nation's first organization to utilize new 900-number technology to raise money for openly gay and lesbian candidates.

just out

NEWSMAGAZINE

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Out to save the planet

NEWS

8-15 NORTHWEST

Bills pass in House; tradeswomen gather, train; bias crime reported; pets show pride at Pride; p:earblossoms fund-raiser moves youth forward; trans library finds permanent home; deco goes kitsch; familiar spot evolves; reputation follows Pride board member; domestic partnership passes in Washington; activist Bob Ball builds success

16-17 NATIONAL

Anti-hate crime bill introduced; California marriage bill advances in committee; second-parent adoption passes in Colorado Senate; Connecticut marriage bill sees gains; hearing set for Indiana journalism teacher; marriage ban dies in Indiana committee; gay rights bills prove victorious in Maryland; New Hampshire civil unions inch toward reality

18-19 WORLD

Distress over Ukraine's Eurovision entry; Gay's the Word might close; Normal Heart theater trashed; Blair: Civil partnerships 'profound'; city funds Reykjavik Pride; Turkish queer students organize for first time; chief Italian bishop's cathedral defaced; Amnesty: Honduran gay activist beaten, raped; gays attacked at Jamaican carnival; Australian pop star comes out

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