

northwest

Transgender 101

Activist imparts experience, guidance

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Transitioning on the job, in a very public environment, has given Cris Land the experience to lecture and train schools, communities and businesses about transgender issues. He began living as a man at his former workplace, Oregon Health & Sciences University, seven years ago.

"My experience at OHSU is if people know the right thing to do, they're pretty much always going to do it," said Land.

He and his partner, Hillary Smith, live in Columbia County, where Land works as an information technology management consultant, co-chairs the Basic Rights Oregon board and speaks about gender identity topics with frankness. He is also co-founder of Coqsure, the state's first social group for female-to-male transgender people.

When an editing error led to Land's gender being misidentified in *Just Out*'s April 4 article "OK to be Gay," Land created a teaching moment over coffee for *Just Out* and our readers.

Jaymee R. Cuti: What is an important transgender 101 lesson for *Just Out* readers?

Cris Land: Be respectful and to honor people's differences when it comes to gender identity. As part of that, it means to not make assumptions of people's gender identity based on their name and how they might present. For people who identify as genderqueer, it can be really tough for them when it comes to things like pronouns, especially if they're third gender and don't identify as part of the spectrum.

When it comes to transgender issues, I'm pretty good, but I can stumble. When people can see my intentions are good and I'm trying to honor them in a way that they deserve to be honored, they give me quite a bit of latitude and understanding. It's pretty easy to tell between someone with good intentions and someone who is clueless or refuses to be respectful.

With the pronoun thing, when in doubt, ask. When you don't need to genderize somebody, don't. Part of what we have in this binary system is binary pronouns. Mistakes happen. We're all learning how to deal with this stuff.

JRC: What is your background with political organizing in the queer rights movement?

CL: I've been on the BRO board since July of 2006 and was elected co-chair at my first official meeting in September of 2006. My work with BRO before that time had been really just in an advisory capacity. I was somebody [former executive director Roey Thorpe] could call when she wanted an opinion on whether or not BRO was heading in the right or wrong direction. I also sponsored a couple of workshops around town.

I worked on more of the grassroots side of things. I was most interested in getting on the streets and doing hearts-and-minds kind of work. I was a Lesbian Avenger before I transitioned and did things with Queer Nation. When I did my career change and started working for myself, I decided I wanted to broaden my political horizons. With the emphasis on grassroots organizing and moving to Columbia County, I see that kind of work is going to be critical.

I've done some traditional types of political organizing in addition to grassroots work, including legislative campaigns, working with a statewide foundation and working on a board level with an organization that has achieved with a lot through the hard work and talent of people with BRO.

JRC: How does the work of the BRO board support the work of the organization and visa versa?

CL: When BRO was in its organizational phases, the board had a day-to-day role with operations. During the past year and a half, there's been a transition for the board to become more strategic. There was a planning session in 2006 that resulted in a direction for the board to become less hands-on and more into oversight and strategic planning, which is appropriate for an organization of this size and cultural maturation. We're a bit in transition, especially since we've been working without a [permanent executive director].

The board is headed toward entering in on longer-term strategies, a couple years out; helping set priorities for the organization; and ensuring that the staff and volunteers have the tools they need to do their work.



MARTY DAVIS

Cris Land's activism work led to a co-chairmanship on the Basic Rights Oregon board.

The board approves the budget, hires the executive director, provides oversight to the executive director, and we play a major role in fund raising. Most of us participate in public functions and participate in campaigns.

The search [for a new executive director] has taken a lot of our time, and obviously the legislation has been a really big deal. I'm going to start working on board recruitment so we can be more geographically diverse and obviously more racially diverse and all kinds of diversity.

We're here to help support [BRO's new executive director, John Hummel]. It's a hand-in-hand process. The executive director reports to the board. The board's investment to provide oversight is an important role to our board. Does that mean that we're going to come into the weeds with daily operational decisions? No. I want to hear from John about what his vision is for the organization and what he needs by way of the board to help support that vision.

JRC: What is John Hummel's leadership strategy?

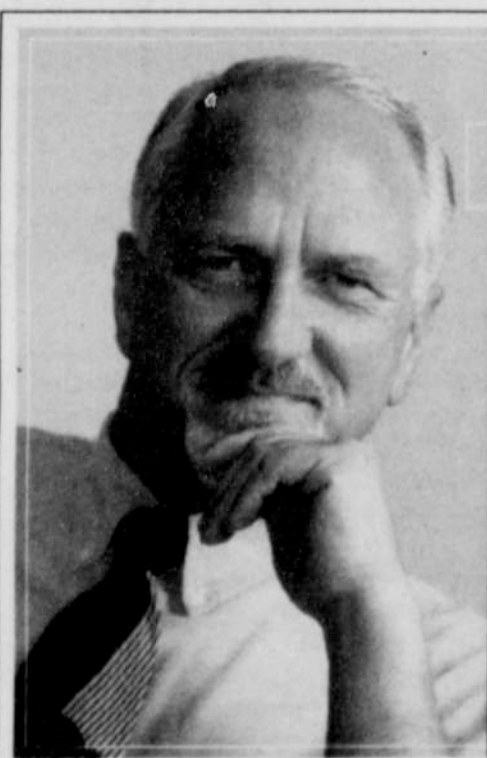
CL: John brings a special passion to the organization, and he understands Oregon politics,

Oregon culture. He worked hard in Idaho and was successful there. There will be a lot of similarities with what he's done there. John is going to be focused on getting this legislation passed, and then we're going to have to turn around and organize ourselves to ensure that the rights that we've just gotten are not stripped away in 2008, the next election cycle.

Longer term, we're going to have to support the people in the Legislature that have been friends to GLBT people. John recognizes that it's not just enough to get laws passed and have victories in lawsuits. We need to continue to change the hearts and minds of Oregonians to achieve full equality. We need to address bigotry and homophobia.

JRC: What else do you want *Just Out* readers to know?

CL: I wanted to say that the courage and leadership that [state Rep. Tina Kotek, D-North Portland] and the other leaders in the Legislature, the staff and volunteers at BRO and hundreds of others who have worked so hard for these victories both now and going back since the beginning of time are heroes, and I'm proud to be a part of this historic victory. 



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