

northwest

The Freshman

Tina Kotek thrives in first legislative session

by Jack Turteltaub

"It's been a whirlwind" is how Tina Kotek described her experience in the 74th legislative session that concluded June 28 in Salem. The freshman representative for District 44, who also experienced personal tragedy as the session unfolded, conveyed a combination of pride and relief as she spoke about the Legislature's accomplishments and her personal role.

Kotek's timing was good as her party, the Democrats, took control of the Legislature for the first time in more than a decade. That allowed the Legislature, in alliance with Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski, to press forward with bills that had been stymied for years.

Kotek said, "I think everyone agrees that it was a fantastic session." The pride resonates in her voice as she ticks off some of the accomplishments: increased funding for primary and secondary education, a Healthy Children amendment for the November ballot, protection for Oregon consumers from exorbitant payday interest loans, lobbyist reform and, of course, two landmark gay rights bills.

The Blue Oregon blog reported that this past session was the shortest since 1995. The previous two regular sessions lasted into August. Since so many bills were passed this time around, it means the 74th was also one of the most efficient. By adjourning early, Blue Oregon also noted, taxpayers saved almost \$1 million in legislative expenses. The Democratic leadership, with strong bipartisan support, agreed to a goal of finishing the session by the end of June. Kotek stated that this required "extraordinary discipline."

Kotek is also proud of the leadership of the Democratic majority and her personal work for welfare reform, the Healthy Children proposed constitutional amendment, revised nutritional standards for public schools and her efforts on behalf of Senate Bill 2 and House Bill 2007, the two gay rights measures, which Kotek described as "historic pieces of legislation."

She said one of her most difficult but satisfying moments was testifying last April with her partner, Aimee Wilson, in support of HB 2007, the domestic partnership bill. Kotek also carried the bill on the floor. She said, "I tried to give a very personal speech: 'This is about me and my family.'"

Kotek is especially proud of the inclusion of

transgender people in the nondiscrimination law. She was also pleased by the support of the business community. "Business leaders knew we had to show we are a progressive state to compete in today's world."

While Kotek realizes that the protections and rights conferred do not bring full equality, she is pragmatic about the "post-Measure 36 world." That measure amended the constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Kotek pointed out that to skirt a potential constitutional crisis and certain legal challenge, it was important to create a different legal entity to formally protect same-sex relationships.

Kotek is also pleased with her role in sponsoring House Bill 2469, a welfare reform bill that addresses problems in the system since federal reforms in the 1990s. "The purpose is to help people get to self-sufficiency through treatment, job training, etc.," she said.

There is also House Bill 2650, which will "establish statewide nutritional standards for schools." Kotek says this reduces or eliminates junk foods in vending machines that contribute to childhood obesity and other health problems.

Kotek has been a strong supporter of the Healthy Children Act, a proposed amendment to the state constitution to raise tobacco taxes. The money provides increased coverage for children through the Oregon Health Plan and increases the affordability of health care.

Despite a successful session, Kotek's personal tragedy almost derailed her as the session began. As she was being sworn in last January in the presence of Wilson, her parents and her siblings, who flew in from out of state, she was worried. Her mother was "not feeling well."

After a battery of tests, Kotek's mom was diagnosed with a tumor and hospitalized in Salem. "It was the same day the Legislature opened for business," said Kotek. She was suddenly trying to cope with powerful feelings of fear and grief and making trips to the hospital, just as she was supposed to be focusing on the bills ahead.

Kotek, who has been a policy expert on children's health and family issues, said that even for her, her mother's illness was "eye-opening." "My mother was in two different hospitals, four different floors. She had many tests done. Fortunately, she



State Rep. Tina Kotek, D-North/Northeast Portland, is taking a brief breather after a landmark legislative session.

had great insurance. But what if that hadn't been the case?"

Unfortunately, Kotek's mother's health deteriorated rapidly. Kotek's family returned home to Pennsylvania and decided to keep her mom comfortable as they ran out of medical options. Kotek joined them for the final few days of her mother's life.

Only a week after her mother's death Feb. 4, Kotek returned to Oregon to plunge into the furious pace the Legislature had set for itself. She said she just forced herself to go forward.

Kotek said Wilson and other legislators and staffers were supportive. She said it was also a comfort to imagine at certain times that "my mom was with me."

Unlike other lawmakers who lived farther from Salem, Kotek said she was fortunate to return home each night. But that meant long days, including a two-hour commute. Kotek would leave her North Portland home early in the morning and drive to her underground parking spot at the Capitol grounds. She would go to her office or to committees and spend the next nine to 11 hours absorbed in work.

Kotek described the year as a great learning experience, a crash course as newcomers try to learn the procedures and rules of the Legislature. She also learned personalities and styles; the priorities and skills of other legislators; the complex interplay of committees, hearings and bills in various stages of revision; and how to handle lobbyists and support staff.

And the political process itself can be brutal.

Kotek says, "Politics is a contact sport, but you can't take it personally."

Kotek did have one advantage. She had worked as a public policy advocate for several previous sessions, and she had spent considerable time observing and participating in the process.

She already knew many of the players. Kotek said she quickly learned "the back stairwells to avoid the lobbyists."

And what lies ahead for Kotek? She is working in Little Rock, Ark., as a senior consultant for the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a national initiative to reduce childhood obesity through the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation.

Kotek's enthusiasm remains high as she looks forward to returning to the political grind next year. While it is too early to announce, she says she plans to run for re-election.

Despite potential turnover with the possibility of House Speaker Jeff Merkley, D-Portland, entering into a congressional run and the announcement that state Sen. Kate Brown, D-Portland, will not return, Kotek remains optimistic. She believes that the public is satisfied with results of the past session and that there is strong support for more reform. Kotek plans to be there to push for more bills, advocate for her priorities and continue the work she has only just begun. **10**

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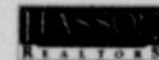
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