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Shut Your Mouth

State Sen. Gary George roils equal rights activists with shocking comments

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

Oregon state Sen. Gary George, R-Newberg, says he doesn't hate gays. He just doesn't want to hear a word out of their mouths.

George, along with state Rep. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, is sponsoring a ballot initiative to repeal the Oregon Equality Act, which bans discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity statewide. In an exclusive March 21 interview with *Just Out* that has rocked equal rights supporters across the country, he implored gays to "mature" while simultaneously recommending they return to the closeted atmosphere of the 1950s and suggesting that the recent murders of queer youth Simmie Davis and Lawrence King were provoked by gays being "oppressive toward straights."

Chuck Wolfe, chief executive officer of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which provides financial and campaign support to out political candidates, described George's statements as "shocking" and "outrageous." After the interview landed on The Associated Press wire, the national blogosphere exploded with rallies for George's resignation, indignant rants on his perceived homophobia and angry diatribes alternately describing him as a "psycho" and "troglodyte."

Closer to home, *The McMinnville News-Register* blasted him on the front page of its March 15 edition with the headline "George

Ripped Over Gay Rights Repeal Initiative." Out lesbian state Rep. Tina Kotek, D-North/Northeast Portland, said she was simply "disgusted" by his remarks, adding, "It's a very good thing he's retiring from public office."

But inflammatory pronouncements and a reputation for being on the fringes of legislative influence have long been part of George's personal profile. Once described by the *News-Register* as a legislator "not taken seriously in the Capitol," his most substantive work in Salem seems to have involved fixing potholes, championing gun owners' rights, targeting the "political correctness" of perceived hate crimes (he once proposed a bill marking Starbucks store vandalism as a "hate crime") and carrying the banner for the special interests of motorcyclists (George "looks great in his pony tail and leathers," according to the Web site EasyRider.com). Twice he was booted from chairman positions in legislative committees.

George's inflammatory interview with *Just Out* came at a sensitive time for sexual minorities, many still reeling from the "homosexuals are a greater threat than terrorists" comment racing across the Internet from Oklahoma state Rep. Sally Kern, R-Oklahoma City. She has been unapologetic about her remarks.

The extent to which George's interview, and the outrage it caused, will either harm him or help his cause remains to be seen. Less than 24 hours after the interview appeared,

Basic Rights Oregon used his comments as ammunition in a fund-raising appeal via e-mail.

After 12 years in the state Senate, George has decided to retire when this legislative session ends (see sidebar). In his March 15 interview with the *News-Register*, he suggested vitriolic reactions to the *Just Out* interview from gay rights allies might make his repeal case stronger.

George's co-sponsored ballot initiative, in the draft stage, goes before the public in late March. A total of 82,769 signatures are required by July 3 to bring the issue to voters this fall. A 2007 initiative attempt by gay rights foe Marilyn Shannon—also an active figure behind the current initiatives—to force a public vote on the Oregon Equality Act and Oregon Family Fairness Act failed to secure the 55,179 verified signatures required to earn a spot on the ballot.

The failure of that initiative prompted a federal lawsuit, *Lemons vs. Bradbury*, by the Arizona-based Alliance Defense Fund against the Oregon secretary of state. That lawsuit was decided Feb. 1 in favor of the state of Oregon, allowing same-sex domestic partnerships to proceed in earnest starting Feb. 4. But in yet another swing at equal rights in Oregon, the Alliance Defense Fund has filed an appeal to that decision, and the case will be heard by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals at a date to be determined. **jo**

"We all know the gay person that nobody notices—I think that is where we need to head....

I go back to the '50s and '60s. We had friends that were quote homosexual, and they kept to themselves."

—Gary George

"My advice to the gay community is shut up, just don't talk about it. If you walk around talking about what you do in the bedroom, you should be on the pervert channel."

—Gary George

"The 6-foot-4 senator stands tall for his constituents.... He cares about the little guy and how government spends his money. As the father of five children and as a grandfather, he understands the need to bring hope and prosperity to our state, to continue his efforts to make Oregon a better place to live...and bring a smile to his wife's face."

—Gary George's Oregon Legislature Web site

By the Numbers

According to the most recent statewide count tallied by Basic Rights Oregon, as of March 18 more than 1,700 same-sex couples have registered as domestic partners. Of those, 12 couples reside in Yamhill County, which Republican state Sen. Gary George represents.

