

northwest

Welcome Aboard

Human Relations Office's new director faces surprise funding shortfall

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Conceived by Portland Mayor Tom Potter in the wake of the César Chávez Boulevard renaming fiasco, the Office of Human Relations sprung into being May 7 with the hire of María Lisa Johnson, its first director.

A week later, her office was caught in the crossfire of what some refer to as a City Hall grudge match.

After learning that Potter's proposed budget axed nearly all projects proposed by City Commissioner Sam Adams, City Commissioner Randy Leonard proposed an alternate budget May 14—and ongoing funding for the Office of Human Relations isn't in it.

"If the mayor is not happy, he has a number of things he can propose," said Leonard. "He can take money from his ongoing staff and fund the Office of Human Relations."

Leonard's budget also funds a settlement with the Portland Firefighters' union that Potter's left out.

The City Council approved the Office of Human Relations in January to oversee the existing Racial Profiling Committee and Immigrant and Refugee Task Force and the newly established Human Rights Commission. The Human Rights Commission is charged with "fostering diversity and resolving issues

rooted in bias and discrimination."

Even if Leonard's version of the budget is approved, however, he says the Office of Human Relations isn't necessarily doomed. Both Leonard and Adams' chief of staff, Tom Miller, concur that it's not uncommon for staff funding to be approved on a year-to-year rather than an ongoing basis.

"We've approved the Office of Human Relations as a permanent office," said Leonard. "Every year, council will have to make an affirmative [funding] decision."

According to Miller, funding a new office year by year is a measured decision. "Typically when the city creates a new program, it's often funded one time in order to prove its effectiveness," he said.

But for Potter—who remembers past attempts at creating similar commissions to address racial and other bias issues in Portland—this lack of financial commitment sends the wrong message. "Symbolically, this says to the community that we're not committed to the Office of Human Relations or human rights in Portland," he said. He also noted the challenge in attracting top-notch employees to the office for potentially temporary jobs.

Portland's Human Rights Commission is actually a returning entity. The city formed a similar commission in 1948, but it was cut from the

budget in 2003. The 2008 Office of Human Relations is robustly funded with \$200,000 in its first year.

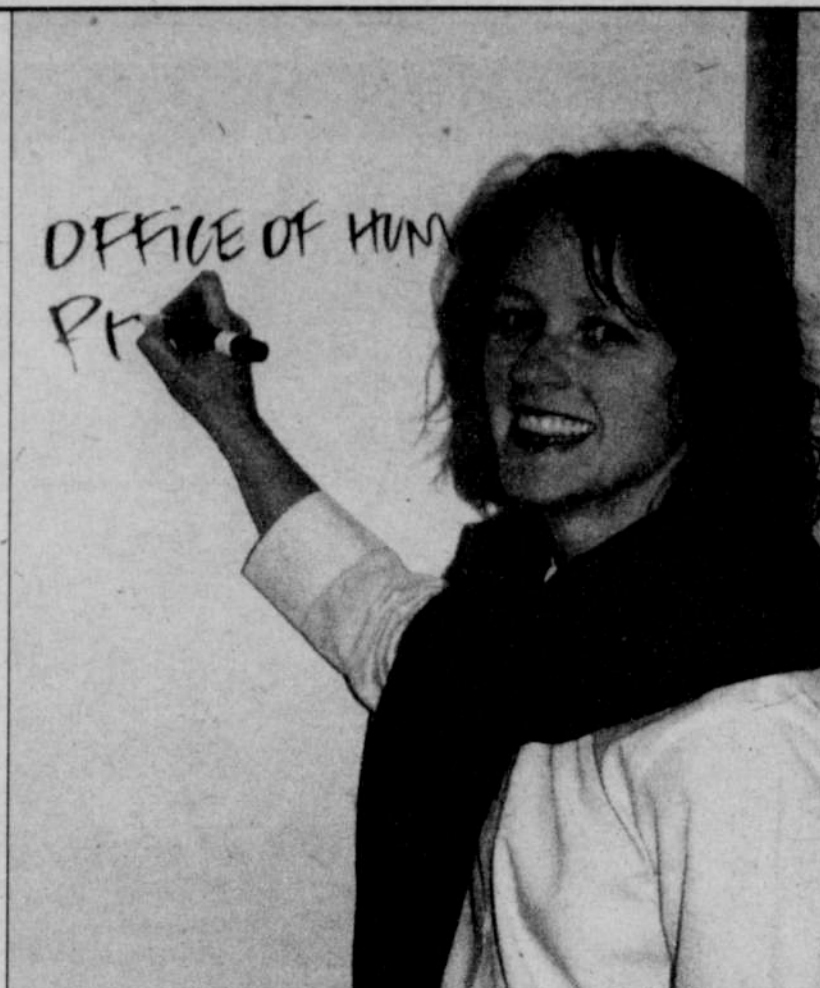
Johnson, who resigned as executive director of the Latino Network to accept this position, says she will fight tenaciously to keep her office staffed.

"I don't think by the end of 12 months, we can say there are no violations of human rights, discrimination or bias in Portland. It really requires an ongoing commitment to call out violations," said Johnson.

During the proposed street renaming of North Interstate Avenue to César Chávez Boulevard, the Latino Network held a meeting to bring race to the forefront. "We brought community leaders to highlight the issue of race and civil rights in the renaming of streets," said Johnson.

Although Johnson's experience lies with advocating for immigrant populations, she vows that the Human Relations Office is "not a single-issue office or an office driven by issues of a single community."

However, Johnson admits that she lacks expertise



María Lisa Johnson, an experienced advocate for immigrant rights, will direct the new Office of Human Relations.

in issues surrounding sexual minorities. She plans to hold listening parties to help identify priorities.

"This is an area I'm going to be a listener on," she said. "Most of my political work has been on communities of color; however, I am really eager to listen and learn about what the issues are."

Several people of color testified before the City Council in support of ongoing funding for the Office of Human Relations, although no members of the queer community testified.

Potter has until June 4 to negotiate for a budget that provides ongoing funding to the Office of Human Relations. 10

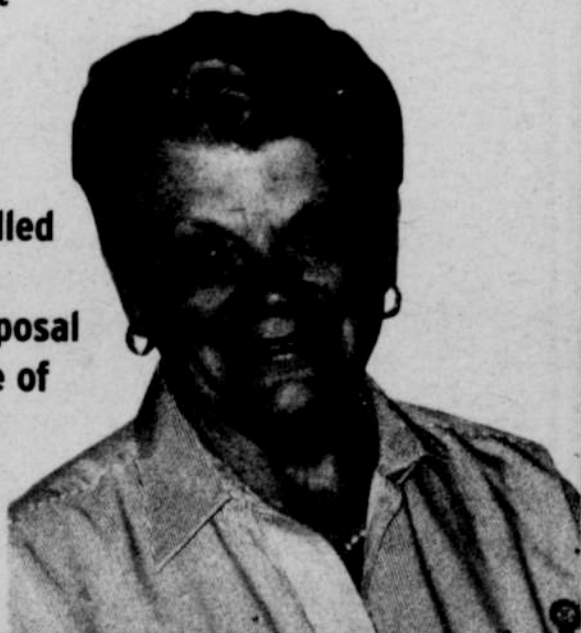
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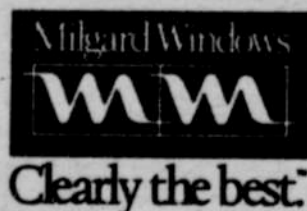
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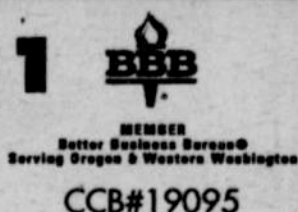


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503-283-9481

8124 N. Denver



Sara Chinske

Loan Officer

Oregon Mortgage Group, Inc.

541-868-2660

sara@oregonmortgagegroup.com



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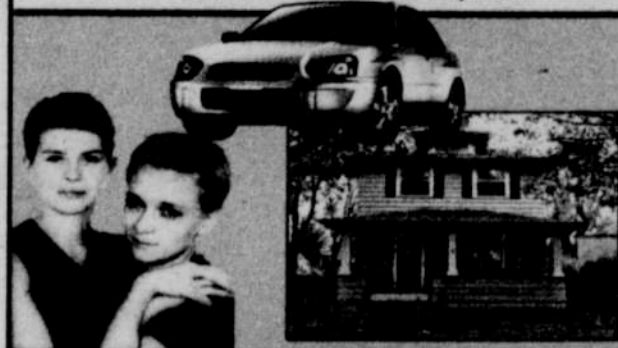
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