

northwest

Our Walk

A progressive voice from a divided city

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Karol Collymore finds her truths to be self-evident. She believes in being an ally and a volunteer. She believes Portland is capable of a higher discourse, with room for dissent, when confronting race, gender and sexuality.

Roey Thorpe, an equality movement leader for sexual minorities, considers Collymore a "true progressive" and "honorary gay."

"Karol cares so deeply about social justice for everybody that it shapes the way she lives her entire life," said Thorpe. "She's my hero."

At 31, Collymore has worked on political campaigns for U.S. presidential candidate Al Gore in 2000, New Mexico congressional candidate Richard Romero in 2002 and Oregon Supreme Court Judge Virginia Linder in 2006.

She lends an au courant, sage and kinetic presence to Multnomah County as Commissioner Jeff Cogen's communications and projects manager.

As a black woman born in Panama to Spanish-speaking parents, Collymore shares her unique perspective on the blog BlueOregon.com.

Jaymee R. Cuti: What brought you to Portland and prepared you to live and work here?

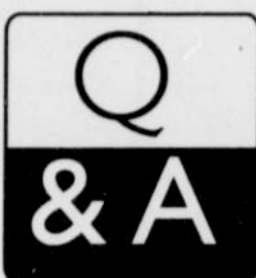
Karol Collymore: I worked on the Al Gore race while I was still in college. I wanted to be really involved in politics. It turned out to be completely life-defining.

I was born in Panama and grew up in Albuquerque. I went to the University of New Mexico.

By 2003, I'd been working in New Mexico politics for three years. I couldn't see the future that I wanted in politics there. I applied to work at American Heart Association, and they sent me to Portland.

A year later I got a job at [the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League], so at 25, I'm development director of this fantastic women's nonprofit. It was a really maturing experience. If I had one terrible [fund-raising] event, we couldn't get a ballot measure done or support a candidate.

Now I'm Jeff Cogen's communications and projects manager. I maintain the Web site and blog, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr—all the avenues to having him be a transparent elected official.



JRC: What is your beat at BlueOregon?

KC: Kari [Chisholm] thought I should write for BlueOregon. I said, "I'm not a writer," and he said, "Just do it." Three years later, I'm an editor.

I've fallen into the area of writing about things that are left unsaid: race, gender, sexuality. I'm interested in the ideas of equality as something we should have more discussions about, especially in this town.

JRC: Has there been a reader's response that has stuck with you?

KC: Two years ago I wrote about how being gay wasn't the new black. Because of my deep passion for gay issues, it was hard for me to say that. Equality is the overriding issue, but it's not the same issue. If I were a white lesbian, it's up to me to tell people that I'm a lesbian, but I'm a black woman and I have no protection. I don't want anyone to live in a closet, but if there's a space you need to protect yourself as a GLBT person, you can and I can't. There are many similarities and 100 places where we can walk together, but it's not the same walk.

JRC: How did your passion for gay rights begin?

KC: My parents never raised me in any sort of context of gay or straight. I came to it with true openness. In college, four guy friends told me within a year that they were gay. I have a sign on my forehead that says: "Please tell me that you're gay. I will accept and feel open toward you."

I worked at [Basic Rights Oregon], fund raising in 2006. I sat on their [political action committee] board, and I'm now on the Q Center board.

I'm a strong believer in allies. Allies get things done. White people elected Obama. You have to

have allies that don't look like you or aren't armed the same as you.

JRC: You described yourself as "O-motional" over President Obama's inauguration. What does his presidency mean to you?

KC: I think people of color, not just black people—I also consider myself Latina—have to work so hard for anyone to give you just average credit. And if you mess up, watch out, they're coming for you. You carry the weight of your skin color on your back at all times. When Obama won, it proved that black people can do this. It's stupid to have to say that, but there's no more doubt. It's erased.

I was not an Obama girl at first. There's that idea that you don't want to put your hopes on someone and it doesn't work out and then you're disappointed again.

I relate to the idea that we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can do things at a higher level of discourse—it doesn't have to be shouting, calling somebody a Nazi or throwing people under the bus. People have called Obama a terrorist and the man is as cool as cool can be and that's lovely.

JRC: How did you help get Mayor Sam Adams elected, and what is your reaction to the scandal?

KC: I sat on the "kitchen cabinet" for Adams early in his campaign as a group of advisers.

I hope this is resolved in a timely and fair manner to everybody involved. Politics is filled with really good people who want to do good work, and I hope this doesn't define the good work that



MARTY DAVIS

Karol Collymore blogs about race, gender, sexuality and other things left unsaid at BlueOregon.com.

other elected officials and their staffs are doing.

JRC: How progressive is Portland?

KC: I don't think we are at a point where we can call Portland a multicultural city. If you mean

art and music, a really rich culture of straight and GLBT thinkers, then yes. But all you have to do is read comments after *The Oregonian* article about Obama's inauguration to know that it's still a long discussion. It's a discussion I want to stick around and have. Portland likes its progressive reputation and is loath to bring up the racial aspect, the lack of diversity.

Someone commented on a blog I wrote that "black people want civil rights for themselves but not for gay people." That's a heartbreaker. It invalidates the presence of GLBT people of color. How do we still live in a place that allows people to paint others in broad brushes? That's part of the problem with the Sam scandal—you risk painting people with broad brushes.

JRC: What other passions do you pursue?

KC: I'm on the board of Hands on Portland. I believe in volunteering. We did a trip last year to New Orleans.

I feel really strongly about gay marriage in Oregon. We had discrimination written into our constitution, and I don't think there's been enough of an uproar. We live in the United States of America. If you want something done differently, you fucking do it and stop blogging about it. This circles back to allies. If you really want to be an ally, then let's get to work. 10

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