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NORTHWEST NEWS

**Holding Ground,
Pushing Forward**

Kate Kendell's weekend in Portland kicks off a collaboration with Basic Rights Oregon

By AMANDA WALDROUPE

A September 12-13 fundraiser for Basic Rights Oregon, billed as a combination lecture and cocktail affair, is bringing a heavy hitter of the national gay and lesbian rights scene to Portland in the hopes of fostering partnership between the two organizations.

Kate Kendell, the executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), a San Francisco-based organization advocating for the legal and civil rights of gay people, will be speaking in Portland on the challenges currently confronting the gay community. Her Saturday afternoon talk will also assess the progress the movement toward marriage equality and other rights for gay people has made, both nationally and in Oregon.

"We have so many opportunities and challenges right now," Kendell told *Just Out* in a phone interview.

No longer on the defensive by being entirely spurred to action by detractors, Kendell thinks the campaign for gay rights is at an interesting crossroads: holding ground.

"Our challenge right now is to hold ground and beat back our opponents, those who really are relentless in denying us every single gain," Kendell said.

Kendell views the current movement for gay rights as a succeeding one. Pointing to the number of states that have legalized same-sex marriage—Vermont, the most recent, when it legislatively passed the measure, effective September 1—she predicts it will not be long until marriage equality is a nationally recognized right.

"As every other civil rights issue decided by the Supreme Court or Congress has demonstrated, we are all one country," Kendell said. "We cannot sustain a patchwork of protections where, depending on an accident of geography, you're protected."

Kendell also puts her hopes on an unlikely ally: Theodore Olson. A conservative California lawyer who argued in front of the Supreme Court in the Bush v. Gore case (2000) and defended the interrogation and torture policies of the Bush administration, Olson has filed a federal lawsuit challenging California's infamous Proposition 8, telling the *New York Times* that gay marriage is about "rights and happiness and equal treatment."

"I think having someone of the stature and conservative credentials of Ted Olson supporting marriage rights for gay people

and same-sex couples is historic and could be a real game changer," Kendell said, adding that she has spoken multiple times with Olson regarding his case.

Kendell's path to becoming a nationally recognized figure in the gay rights movement was as unlikely as Olson's support for gay marriage.

Born in Portland, Kendell grew up Mormon in Utah. Becoming aware of her sexual orientation as a teenager, Kendell began to realize the incompatibilities of that and her religion. An attraction toward feminist ideals during her college years didn't help, either.

Her religious upbringing, she admits, gives her a unique perspective on arguments opposing marriage equality that are rooted in religion. Many of her family members continue to be devout in their faith, yet accept her and her family.

"I realize that I don't want to make the same mistakes of generalization that our opponents do when they demonize gay people," Kendell said.

While working as the first staff attorney for Utah's ACLU chapter, Kendell was encouraged to apply for a similar position at NCLR, which she got in 1994. In 1996, she became its executive director.

The extent of the collaboration between NCLR and Basic Rights Oregon is not yet clear.

For her part, Kendell was vague.

"Our commitment is to work with BRO and take BRO's lead and provide whatever assistance BRO wants us to provide," Kendell explained, whether that assistance is legal, financial or strategic.

Speaking about BRO's recently launched Marriage Matters campaign, Kendell said Oregon is one state among few that could repeal its ban on same-sex marriage. She believes that Measure 36's passage in 2004 doesn't mean that Oregon is a homophobic state, citing the fact that Oregon rejected many anti-gay ballot initiatives in the 1990s.

"It means that we have not spoken to [Oregonians] in a way that moves them on marriage in the same way that they were moved to reject these other anti-gay [measures]," Kendell said. **JO**

Kendell speaks on "The State of Our Unions: LGBT Legal and Policy Briefing" 3-5 p.m. Sept. 12 at Flying Cat Coffee Co., 3041 SE Division, free, no RSVP necessary. A benefit party is 3-5 p.m. Sept. 13 at Nostrana Restaurant, 1401 SE Morrison. A \$25 donation is suggested.



Our challenge right now is to hold ground and beat back our opponents, those who really are relentless in denying us every single gain," said Kate Kendell of the National Center for Lesbian Rights