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At OHSU

Sorenson new president of AFSCME #328

Clinic support staffer Jaimie Sorenson began on Nov. 18 a two-year term as president of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 328. The union represents about 4,500 workers at Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU).

Sorenson outpolled incumbent president Mike Bandy in a runoff held Nov. 5-10, after an initial vote held Sept. 17-22 ended in a 247-247 tie. The position is unpaid.

Sorenson, 31, started at OHSU in 1996, while she was still a senior at Portland's Madison High School. For two years, she worked as a temporary part-time admin worker in the medical transcription department. Then she was accepted to Southern Oregon University, moved to Medford, and worked swing shift in a lab at Rogue Valley Medical Center.

At school, she learned about the harm caused by trade globalization. She wanted to join students protesting the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle, but couldn't afford it: Her permanent full-time wages at nonunion Rogue Valley were less than she'd made as a temp at OHSU.

Then she got a very bad cold, which she says awakened her to the reality of a nonunion workplace. She had declined the optional health insurance, which had steep premiums — and no employer contribution. Her workplace also lacked paid sick days; missing work meant she lost wages.

"That was quite an eye-opener for me," Sorenson recalls. "I realized how good I had had it at OHSU, and the



JAIMIE SORENSON

staggering difference as to why."

It was the union that made the difference, Sorenson says.

At Rogue Valley Medical Center, Sorenson tried to spark discussions of unionization, but found her co-workers fearful. She determined she had to leave Medford, and returned to Portland, and her old job. But things had changed in two years. The pool of transcriptionists had shrunk from 80 to eight, their work outsourced to India.

While working swing shift, Sorenson finished up an associates degree at Portland State University.

Now a union member, she decided it was time to get involved. She responded to an e-mail invitation to become a steward. Then in 2004, she was appointed to chair Local 328's political action committee, which came with a seat on the local Executive Board. She organized brown bag lunch meetings, registered people to vote, interviewed legislators, distributed worksite fliers, and recruited volunteers to canvass and

phone bank for candidates and causes.

In 2005, OHSU faced a major proposed budget cut. Sorenson went with other members to lobby the Oregon Legislature one-on-one, and testified at a hearing of the Joint Ways and Means Committee. The money was restored.

That same year she attended her union's national convention in Chicago. Seeing very few delegates under 35, she and other delegates formed a club to encourage young member involvement, calling themselves the Whipper-snappers. Four years later, the group, renamed Next Wave, has chapters around the country.

She was elected secretary of her local in 2007. The following year she was recruited to the statewide Executive Board, and its Executive Committee — as special sector vice president, representing 14 locals at government entities other than state, county, and city.

This year she joined the local's bargaining team to help negotiate a new contract at OHSU. At one point, facing proposals members considered unacceptable, she helped circulate a petition of support for the bargaining team. In less than 24 hours, they had over 2,000 signatures, with which they papered the wall of the bargaining room. Sorenson remembers that when they later presented the stack of petitions to OHSU President Joe Robertson, "his comment was 'Wow. You've been organizing.'" The two sides concluded a three-year deal, which began in August.

"A union can empower you," Sorenson says. "It gives you a voice and a say in the processes that affect your daily life."



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