

Proud to be union — AND transgender

By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

Be Marston is a union bartender who's active in UNITE HERE Local 8. She's also president of the Oregon chapter of Pride at Work — the AFL-CIO's organization for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) union members and their allies. Down-to-earth and quick to laugh, she's an enthusiastic participant at union rallies — proud to be union, and proud to be transgender. Formerly known as Ben, she's a 43-year-old native of Prattville, Alabama. She's lived and worked in Portland 14 years, mixing and serving drinks at the arts venues now known as the Portland 5. On June 20, the day after Be led a large labor union contingent in the Portland Pride Parade, I spoke with her by phone.

LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Why should civil rights for LGBTQ individuals be of concern for the labor movement? Because their members are LGBTQ. If your members are LGBTQ, and an injury to one is an injury to all, then it is your problem by definition. Beyond that, I think there's a lot of benefit to be had. When our union affirms our

identities and supports us, that creates this connection and love for our union. That's the kind of deep commitment that creates real activism, not this quid-pro-quo old-school unionism of like "the union gets this for me."

On the other side, why should workers' rights be a concern for the LGBTQ community?

Well, because there's something like 28 states where you can be legally fired for being LGBTQ. And I'm not aware of too many groups that are working on that. That's a workers right, and that's dead-on our focus as a labor group. Being union as a queer person is huge, because of the job protections. We [LGBTQ people] are much more likely to be fired because of our identity, but [in the union] we've got job protections. What that means is: We can be our full selves, at work, at home. At the company picnic, our partner can be there. We don't have to be closeted and hide. That's huge. For me, coming out in my workplace and having somebody text me and be like, "I saw you using the women's restroom, and it's been reported." And getting that, and kind of freaking out, but also knowing that there's no way in hell that the company I work for is going to say that I can't use

the restroom that corresponds with my gender identity. And I knew that if they did, me and my union rep would go down there and kick their asses.

What would you say to union members who might be curious about someone who is transgender? Is there a right way or wrong way to ask questions about it without coming off as ignorant or bigoted? Well, as far as dos and don'ts, an important one is (and you'd think you wouldn't have to say this) it's considered impolite to ask a transgender person, "Hey, were you born as a man or a woman?" Because you're basically asking them, "What kind of genitalia do you have?" And you wouldn't ask that of anyone else. That's one that we get a lot. Personally, I'm not against political correctness, but I think sometimes it can overstep. I think at a certain point, it does begin to impair dialogue. And we need dialogue in order for change to happen. So I kind of take people where they are.

You were Ben Marston. You've changed your name to Be. Why is that? I haven't legally changed it. I refer to it as how I prefer to be called. I'm going through a transition and I started hormone replacement



Oregon Pride at Work president Be Marston gets ready to lead a labor contingent in the June 19 Portland Pride Parade.

therapy about a year and a half ago. Transgender is used as an umbrella term for a lot of kinds of identities. I identify as female but it's weird to me to adhere to

one gender or the other. I guess I reached a point in my life where I felt like I have to pick a lane. And I felt like that was the identity that summed it up.

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AFL-CIO statement on the Orlando Massacre

National AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, Secretary-Treasurer Elizabeth Shuler and Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre released the following statement in response to the murder June 12 of 49 people at a LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida:

We in the labor movement are resolved to do everything in our power to make sure this never happens again. Forty-nine souls were lost in a cowardly act of violence. These are our brothers, sisters and friends. At least one was our member.

While we have made undeniable progress toward equality, too many in our country still face derision, discrimination and violence. These flames of hatred have been fanned by those in public life who want to marginalize an entire group of people for political gain. It's despicable and it must stop.

But this was more than just an attack on the LGBTQ community. The victims were overwhelmingly young and Latino. Sunday's massacre was an assault on everything our movement stands for: equality, justice, solidarity and inclusion.

It was also an extraordinarily difficult situation for our first responders, who had the traumatic job of sorting the dead from the living, effectively working in a war zone. We thank the police, fire-



fighters and health care providers who saved lives and continue to care for the injured. We will stand with them in the trying days ahead.

Labor is one big family, made up of people of all races, religions, genders, sexual orientations and gender identities. As a family, we will work to provide comfort to our brothers and sisters in Orlando and across the United States. And we will make it our daily mission to ensure America's workplaces and union halls are safe and free from bigotry.

There will be some who try to use this tragedy to further divide us, to pit communities against each other and scapegoat entire faith traditions. Let us be perfectly clear: giving in to division and fear will only add insult to injury. This is a moment for us to come together, embrace our common humanity and take the necessary steps to make our country safer, stronger and more united.