

A lifetime in pursuit of equality

Kathleen Saadat reflects on her career as the city's equity chief and the solutions yet within our reach

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

On Dec. 10, Kathleen Saadat accepted the Lifetime Achievement from the Portland Human Rights Commission. The award comes as Saadat, 72, prepares to retire from her position as diversity development/affirmative action manager for the city of Portland.

Saadat has long been a presence in Oregon working to advance equality and social justice. Originally born in St. Louis, Saadat passed through Oregon on a trip to Anchorage, Alaska, in the late 1960s to visit her brother who was stationed there in the military. She fell in love with the beauty of the area and moved to Portland in 1970.

She has occupied a litany of positions during her career. She has worked at the Cascade AIDS Project, served as the state director of affirmative action, was an assistant to Portland City Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury and strategic plan coordinator for Multnomah County's Department of Community and Family Services. She has also served on Portland's Human Rights Commission, and has sat on a range of boards and committees.

Saadat also helped organize Portland's first gay rights march and was active in opposing Measure 9, an anti-gay ballot initiative that was voted down in 1992.

Jake Thomas: *You've worked with Cascade Aids Project. You've been working on the issue of AIDS for a long time. What are we getting right and what still needs improving?*

Kathleen Saadat: The thing that needs to happen, from my perspective, to more effectively address AIDS is to give better sex education starting with children. It isn't just about AIDS. AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, but we don't protect our children by letting them know about sex, sexuality, sexual behavior, the consequences of their sexual behavior and the politics of their sexual behavior. So we need to start there. We need to remove the



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stigma. That means more of us need to be talking about it with our friends about what we think we could do. People need to get tested, too.

J.T.: *What did you mean by the politics of sexual behavior?*

K.S.: Well, sex is a big political issue in this country. I mean just look at the past election and all this stuff around women and whether or not we should have trans-vaginal ultrasounds. Gender and sex are all through everything, and it's a struggle when you are laboring under stereotypes about your sexual behavior, and then something touches you like AIDS or HIV and the stereotype is exploited to your disadvantage. So if you're seen as promiscuous, as gay men are, period, then that stereotype comes to haunt you when you begin to talk about remedies for HIV and AIDS. If you're seen as oversexed, as many African American men are, then that stereotype begins to haunt you when you begin to talk about education and preventative measures in the African American community.

J.T.: *Portland's demographics have changed*

considerably over the last two decades. Do you think Portland, as a city and culture, has a good grasp on how to celebrate or even engage that diversity?

K.S.: No. But I don't think they're the worst on the block. I think Portland works hard at trying to celebrate, embrace and live with diversity. Portland is certainly ahead of a lot of places, in that we have lots of conversations going on here about diversity and the impact of racism and the impact of sexism. There's lots going on here, which means there's an opportunity for dialogue. You can go to McMenamins once a month and listen to Race Talks, which is the program that McMenamins support. You can go almost anywhere in this city and find somebody talking about lesbian and gay issues or women's issues or older people's issues.

The problem is not the dialogue. The dialogue is good. The dialogue frequently does not point toward some action that will remedy the situation. That is one of the problems. The other problem is people tend to think that these issues are simplistic: that all one has to do is raise your hand shout, let it be done, and it's done. It's not true.

These are deeply rooted emotional and psychological [pause] infections that have us look at the world in certain ways. To rid ourselves of these we need to talk. We need to think, and we need to do high levels of introspection. So I think we are ahead of the game in some things, but we still haven't learned yet what to do about application of the theory we hold.

J.T.: *You said that the dialogue does not direct itself to solutions. What kind of solutions do we need and what kind of problems would they address?*

K.S.: [Sighs] Solutions have to do with changing the systems in which we operate. So that means you need to look at those systems on several levels. Look at the history, look at the policies, look at the procedures, look at the people. If you can find within those things barriers to equity, barriers to equal treatment, then that's where you focus your efforts to change.

You can move a policy. You can rewrite a policy. You can say it blocks, for instance, people from disabilities from getting through your hallways, then you change it.

But there's a piece that we don't touch very well, and that's the personal piece. That's the piece that requires me to do introspection. That's the piece that requires that I do some sort of acceptance of the reality of the history of this country as it has treated people of color and women as it has treated the mentally ill and the physically disabled. There is a history there that we refuse to acknowledge because we absolve ourselves of any responsibility. Now I'm not saying that people are responsible for the past, but they benefit from it or they suffer from it. And that's a conversation that we don't have very well, the one that requires us to look at ourselves and see what our role is in all this.

J.T.: *You served on the city's Human Relations Committee. In retrospect, do you think it helped?*

K.S.: Yes. Yes. It was a place that was willing, where the people were courageous enough to say, let's look at immigration, or let's have a hard look at how our local government is interacting with the federal government with these immigration cases. It was courageous; it was public. It would say, let's have a look at what's going on with the police here in Portland. So, yes, I think they're an incredibly important as a voice that reminds us of the direction we say we want to go and that holds us accountable by ensuring that people who ordinarily wouldn't be heard are heard.

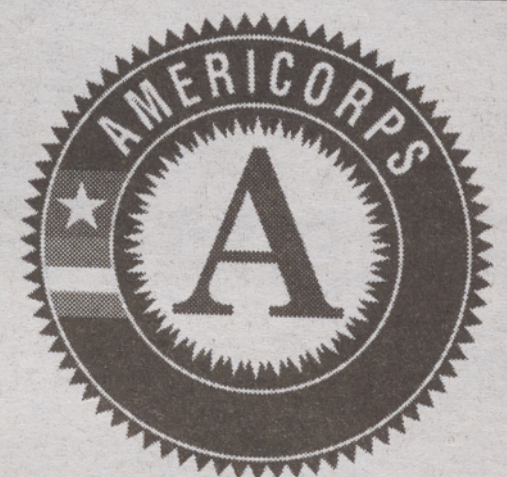
J.T.: *Affirmative action has become a loaded term over the years. What does it mean to you?*

K.S.: Affirmative action is a tool. It's a tool that was introduced as a remedy to past discrimination and the impact of past discrimination. The people who have been resistant to equalize things have often made

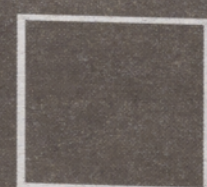
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