

MARISSA MADRIGAL
CHAIR



An Unexpected Leader

Marissa Madrigal chairs Multnomah County through changing times

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Marissa Madrigal remembers the first time a television camera was thrust in her face. She remembers a reporter coming to her house. She remembers the day the spotlight was shone on her and a hefty responsibility thrust on her shoulders. She never thought she would see this day, but she embraced it.

In September, Multnomah County Chair Jeff Cogen announced he was resigning his position after being dogged since the summer by revelations that he had an extramarital affair with a county employee. He also made another announcement. Under county rules, the county chair designates their replacement in the event they don't fulfill their term. Madrigal, Cogen's longtime chief of staff, would be succeeding him, Cogen announced.

Madrigal had worked closely with Cogen since 2006, when she helped manage his campaign for a seat on the Multnomah County Commission. She joined his staff after he was elected and kept her position as Cogen's chief of staff when he became county chair in 2010. Working at the county, Madrigal earned a reputation as an able staffer, someone who didn't seek the spotlight and whose behind-the-scenes-presence shaped county policy.

Multnomah County is the state's largest county government with a \$1.5 billion budget and 5,600 employees

serving 748,000 residents. It runs health clinics, senior services, courts, bridges and elections, along with other functions. People working at the county recall the scandal as a tumultuous time that threatened to tarnish its image and overshadow its work. They also recall Madrigal bringing grace to an ungraceful situation.

Madrigal is someone who has intertwined her life mission with that of the county. She is someone who makes phone calls directly on behalf of struggling people. She is a non-politician thrust into the role of a politician. A county chair of firsts, she holds the deep belief that politics can be a powerful force to change the lives of people, especially the most powerless. Although the scandal challenged her thinking about politics and politicians, she emerged from it with some of her most core convictions cemented.

"Can you spare a van? Can you spare a condo?" shouts a woman outside of the Union Gospel Mission as a crowd of people participating in the Day of Homelessness Awareness march stream past.

Madrigal is one of the few elected officials at the event. It's cold out, and she's wearing a navy blue coat and a colorful scarf. She stands at nearly 5 feet 5 inches. She has a shock of black hair that has a few strands of gray. At times, she wears a look of concern that might be from the cold.

During the march, she introduces

herself to people simply as "Marissa," leaving out that she holds one of the most powerful political positions in the region. She chats with local activist Cameron Whitten about exercise and the benefits of raw pineapple. Noticing that a high school student, who is shadowing a county staff member for the day, looks cold, Madrigal offers her gloves.

"Sorry," she says to him when he refuses. "I didn't mean to mom you."

Madrigal lives in the Woodstock neighborhood in Southeast Portland with her husband and two children. It's the first home they've ever owned. She is addicted to her smart phone. She is gluten-free, which she says makes her feel better, even though she realizes it makes her one of "those people." She usually starts every day with a protein shake and spends time with her kids before arriving at the office around 8:30 or 9 a.m.

At the sixth floor offices of the county building, Madrigal jokingly says she instituted a rule that no one could burn food in the microwave. She has a friendly cooking rivalry with Communications Director David Austin. Her co-workers got her a grill as a birthday/housewarming gift.

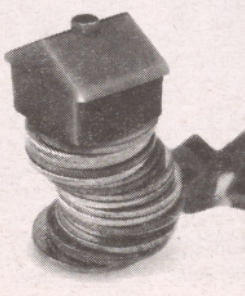
Austin, who has known her since 2007 when he was a reporter at The Oregonian, describes her as a non-politician: someone who is authentic and doesn't put themselves above others.

"I jokingly call her my younger older sister," says Austin, who is older than Madrigal, but has still called her for

PHOTO BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

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