

Head of State

GOV. KATE BROWN SPENDS A DAY IN EUGENE
MEETING WITH STUDENTS, TEACHERS
AND REPORTERS

by Corinne Boyer

On a Tuesday morning, Jan. 16, students, teachers and a few state legislators mingled in Eugene's Winston Churchill High School auditorium. A couple of cameras lined the front rows, and soon everyone began looking toward the auditorium door.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown walked down the aisle stopping to shake hands and say hello to the crowd. The overhead lights faded as the Churchill High School band — seated on stage — played the national anthem.

As *Eugene Weekly's* legislative reporter, I was there to cover Brown for the day and get a sense of the governor and what she was thinking about heading into election season. Brown was visiting Churchill High as part of her State of the State tour. Later she would visit the University of Oregon and we would sit down for a one-on-one interview. Issues that Brown would address throughout the day include immigration, homelessness, LGBTQ equality, the rise of white nationalism and discrimination against people of color and public records laws.

"Good morning, everyone," Brown said when she took the Churchill stage. "I was here a year ago." She asked to see the number of hands of students in technical education programs, and began telling the story of her paternal grandmother.

"My grams was a nurse," Brown said, explaining that her grandfather was a doctor who struggled with drug addiction. "But my grams worked really hard. She taught the boys that the key to a better life is education, education, education."

Her dad was one of four boys, she said, and he, along with two of his brothers, became doctors. "Because my dad worked hard," Brown continued, "I never worried about food or the heat being shut off." Her parents taught her that she could do anything. "Eighty-five years ago, my grams put us on a path."

Though she grew up in an economically stable household in Minnesota, Brown said she understands that thousands of Oregonians are struggling. "It was once thought that if you played by the rules, you could get ahead," she said. It's critical that every student graduates from high school, she added, emphasizing that Oregon has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country.

"One in four students doesn't graduate," she told the crowd.

Brown wants the graduation rate to be at 90 percent by 2025. "Will you help me with that goal?" she asked enthusiastically of the assembled students.

Brown gave a nod to state Rep. Julie Fahey and Sen. James Manning for helping secure Career and Technical Education programs in public schools. "Do you enjoy your hands-on learning opportunities?" Brown asked. The high school students cheered and clapped. CTE programs connect students directly to the workforce and provide training for jobs in the IT and natural resources fields, Brown explained.

"Now I want to hear from you about what you want and what you need to succeed," she said as she stepped down from the stage and into the aisles.

Brown was impassioned when telling her family story. I've reported on Brown when she has visited schools and appeared at events in Eugene. She takes time to meet with the press. She stops and shakes hands with people who want to speak with her. She sits in classes with students. She listens when people ask questions, even when her staff is reminding her that her next scheduled event is approaching.

With Brown's appearance structured like a town hall meeting, the Churchill High students came prepared and began asking tough questions about the cost of college, the environment and homelessness.

One student asked Brown about her plan for homeless families. "I was homeless for three years," the student said.

Brown thanked the student for sharing a personal story. "We have 22,000 students who don't have a place to call home," she said, adding that more can be done to provide families with rental assistance and affordable housing. "Every child should have a warm, dry place to call home."

After the assembly, a circle of students congregated around Brown, waiting to speak to her. The governor listened as some asked questions about their safety as LGBTQ students.

"I'm the only elected bisexual governor in the country," Brown said, reiterating the importance that LGBTQ students feel safe.

Another student approached Brown and said, "I'm a queer young woman who wants to run for office." The student told Brown that she is an inspiration to her, and applauded her for all that she is doing as governor.

Kate Brown is the 38th governor of Oregon and the second woman to hold the state's highest elected office. As the former secretary of state, Brown was appointed to the

office after former Gov. John Kitzhaber resigned in 2015. She ran for a two-year term in 2016 and is running for a full term in November.

Rep. Knute Buehler, a Republican representing Bend, is running against Brown in the 2018 gubernatorial race.

BROWN SAID HER MULTI-APPOINTMENT DAY IS NOT ATYPICAL. She loves meeting with people, especially students and small business owners. She received an early endorsement from the League of Conservation Voters, a non-partisan group that tracks environmental legislation and actions. They named Brown their 2017 "Environmental Champion of the Year" recipient and endorsed her last year for the 2018 election.

After lunch, I caught up with Brown and her communications staff at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communications. Brown attended professor Brent Walth's investigative reporting class.

Walth, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, was recently appointed to the Oregon Sunshine Committee, a public records review board. He outlined Brown's 25-year career, noting that the governor has made the biggest improvements in transparency and public records law since 1973.

Brown was seated at the head of the table in a class of more than a dozen students. She started by telling the class that she went to law school because she wanted tools to achieve justice.

But just after finishing law school, she said she experienced "a wakeup call." Brown said she discovered she "was being paid less than a male coworker. I was in a relationship with a woman at the time and scared I'd lose my job."

She became an advocate for Planned Parenthood in the 1991 legislative session — Brown called the organization a radical women's rights group and then joked that the class should have corrected her knowing that Planned Parenthood is not a radical activist group.

The first time she ran for the state Legislature in 1992, Brown was outspent two to one.

Brown won that election by seven votes, and she said people still approach her today saying they were one of that seven. "For me, that was a life lesson — that every single vote is a voice," she said.

Brown said she's worked on issues including child support, women's health and domestic violence issues, as well as making sure that LGBTQ issues were being heard.