



HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER

JENNIFER WILLIAMSON

DANCING BACKWARDS AND IN HEELS

Oregon's women-led Legislature passed a hugely progressive agenda in 2017. Can they keep up the momentum?

BY DIANE DIETZ



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In the heat of early July 2017, not even progressives at the Oregon Capitol could appreciate the immensity of their accomplishments as bill after bill rolled through the Statehouse toward Gov. Kate Brown's willing pen.

Over three days — July 5, 6 and 7 — lawmakers enshrined *Roe v. Wade* protections for abortion in Oregon law, provided for free abortions for immigrant women ineligible for Medicaid based on citizenship, and attacked unequal treatment of black people in the state's criminal justice system by fortifying the state's anti-profiling laws and "defelonizing" hard drug possession in limited cases.

Then, to ice the cake, lawmakers looked after even the least of these by extending Oregon Health Plan coverage to one of the last remaining uninsured populations in the state, immigrant children.

"I've realized in hindsight the magnitude," says Grayson Dempsey, executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Oregon. "The Reproductive Health Equity Act was an incredible, historic victory. The magnitude really can't be overstated."

The changes were big for Oregon progressives inside the state — but set against the national political scene they're nothing short of monumental. It's as if Oregon, like Ginger Rogers, was countering President Donald Trump, backwards and in heels.

"In heels" because, in Oregon, women were leading every step.

While the Trump administration demonized undocumented immigrants as well as legal immigrants from "shithole" countries — and threatened deportation for 800,000 youth who were brought here as children — Oregon fortified its position as the first sanctuary state in the nation by adopting rules about what information state and local governments can provide to federal immigration authorities.

While Congress and the Trump administration hustled to kill Obamacare, the Oregon Legislature preserved coverage for 350,000 Oregonians by adopting a \$300 million tax on hospitals and insurers — thereby keeping \$1 billion in federal match in the state.

While the federal government toyed with health coverage for 9 million children nationally — under Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP — Oregon lawmakers coughed up \$36 million to bring steady, preventive health care to 17,600 additional children through its Cover All Kids law.

These shiny new progressive laws had been in the works for years, Oregon House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson says, but lawmakers definitely acted while looking over their shoulders at Trump's executive orders, legislative priorities and needling tweets.

"The devastating federal policy that this administration is carrying out absolutely made the work we were doing more urgent," Williamson says. "We absolutely needed to move on these things, and we needed to move on them in the 2017 session to make sure we could protect the rights of Oregonians."

As the summer progressed, Oregon's bills were trumpeted in national headlines: "Oregon Just Passed the Most Progressive Reproductive Health Policy in America," "Oregon lawmakers pass historic Reproductive Health Equity Act," and *Pride.com* added its own twist: "Bisexual Governor Kate Brown Passes Nation's Most Progressive Reproductive Health Policy."

Cranky-pants columnist George Will, meanwhile, harrumphed at Oregon's "more-progressive-than-thou" legislation.

The attention felt good to the trifecta of Democratic leaders in the Oregon House, in the Oregon Senate and in

the governor's office. Throughout the fall, they were feted at progressive summits in places such as Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Boston.

"It's been a really exciting time to be from Oregon, to travel nationally and to talk about our successes and to give hope to folks who are working in the trenches in other states," says Williamson, who spoke at a "states resisting" Trump conference in August. "They look at Oregon as a leader, a 'blue beacon' some would say, in these hard times."

This may be the shining hour for Oregon progressives, but their joy may last only a little longer. In the Legislative session that dawns on Monday, Feb. 5 — and the election that follows in November — lawmakers face serious budgetary and political trials that could lead to the undoing of their 2017 wins.

The most diverse Legislature in Oregon history

The progressive legislation may be notable for who passed the laws as much as the laws' lefty slant. Today's

Oregon Legislature is the most female-dominant and racially and ethnically diverse body ever to assemble at the Capitol in Salem.

The 90-member Legislature now includes four Hispanic lawmakers, Rep. Teresa Alonso León, D-Woodburn; Rep. Diego Hernandez, D-East Portland; Rep. Mark Meek, D-Gladstone; and Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego; four black lawmakers, Sen. James Manning Jr., D-Eugene; Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland; Sen. Jackie Winters, R-Salem; and Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Happy Valley; and one Native American, Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland.

Asian-American lawmakers are notably absent.

Oregon would need to roughly triple the number of Hispanic lawmakers to represent the 12.4 percent of the state's population of 494,806 who tick Hispanic on census forms — but there's reason to believe that'll change sooner rather than later.

Freshman Rep. Alonso León, for example, was the first immigrant Latina to be elected to the Oregon Legislature and among just a few ever seated in statehouses nationally. She brought with her the experience of a migrant child: picking strawberries with her family in Willamette Valley fields and living in a house that was unheated and without plumbing.

She graduated from Woodburn High School, earned a bachelor's degree from Western Oregon University, and got her master's degree at Portland State University. She became a citizen five years ago.

Alonso León was the first Hispanic lawmaker elected in House District 22, which encompasses Woodburn, North Salem and a strip between them on either side of Interstate 5 — areas where Hispanic residents have outnumbered all other racial and ethnic groups for at least a decade.

She won her seat despite going toe-to-toe with well-known long time Republican pol Patti Milne, who had held the seat for three terms during the 1990s. Alonso León won despite Nike founder Phil Knight's dropping \$50,000 in her opponent's war chest late in the race.

"She won by a significant margin, 11 points," says Jaime Arredondo, board member of the Woodburn-based organizing group *Acción Política PCUNista* (APP), which backed her candidacy.

In the election immediately following Alonso León's win, APP succeeded in electing the state's first Hispanic majority school board in the Woodburn School District, which enrolls 81 percent Latino school children.

With the passing of generations, Oregon's Latino communities are evolving toward a culture of civic engagement, Arredondo said.

"We come from the fields to the ballot box and now we're in the Legislature," he said.