

# Role Models of Color

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senate districts, and now her mom in county government.

Stegmann wept as she reflected on what her election might mean for residents who feel unheard or unseen.

“My election isn’t about me. It’s about my community, East County,” she said. “Their voices. Their concerns.”

Stegmann plans to work on finding solutions to homelessness, the rising costs of housing, and disparities in criminal justice. She supports programs such as the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion pilot launching this year in downtown Portland which will divert drug users from arrest to recovery.

The Multnomah County Board was entirely white and male until 1974, when Alice Corbett -- a former teacher, hardware-store owner and state senator -- was elected. Gladys McCoy, a social worker from Georgia, was elected in 1978, the first African American member of the board. And in 1987 voters ushered in the first all-women board. The commissioners included Gretchen Kafoury, mother of current Chair Kafoury.

Deborah Kafoury remembers as a girl her mother talking about how she was treated as a first-term legislator in the state House of Representatives. “People would call her sweetie, and honey and pinch her butt,” Kafoury said.

Gretchen Kafoury dedicated her adult life to getting women elected to office, as co-founder of the Oregon chapter of the National Organization for Women and later the Oregon Women’s Political Caucus.

“She was all about women and women’s’ rights. Gender politics was her thing,” Deborah Kafoury said. “It wasn’t that she was a politician who happened to be a woman. She was a woman.”

Like the Kafoury women, Sharon Meieran has learned to navigate male-dominated arenas, first

as a lawyer, then as an emergency-room doctor, then sitting on boards and committees mostly led by men.

She champions access to mental health services for people in crisis and culturally-appropriate services for immigrants and refugees. She’s also advocated for reproductive health, especially for low-income women and women of color, who experience the highest rates of unintended pregnancies; a driver that perpetuates poverty.

Meieran supports the philosophy of the group One Key Question, which asks simply, “Would you like to become pregnant in the next year?” “If the answer is ‘yes,’ then let’s make sure you’re as healthy as you can be,” she said. Maybe that means folic acid supplements or controlling diabetes. “It honors women who want to become pregnant. It honors a woman’s choice.”

Multnomah County is home to more than 50,000 Latino residents, but the county has had few elected Latino leaders. Serena Cruz was the first Hispanic American elected, in 1998, followed by Maria Rojo De Steffey three years later.

Jessica Vega Pederson is the county’s third Latina commissioner. She previously served in the Oregon House where she was the first Latina elected and where she fought for access to government-issued driving cards for undocumented Oregonians, equal pay for women, paid sick leave and higher minimum wages. Locally, she has lobbied for money to install flashing crosswalks on some of the busiest and darkest four-lane roads that carry east Portland commuters to downtown jobs. Health and sustainable communities top her agenda going into her four-year term.

“In east Portland we’re tired of being the exception to services, being told, ‘oh we’ll get to it next year,’” she said. Pedestrian fatalities in her neighborhood are the highest in the county. Rising



Multnomah County Commissioner Lori Stegmann, the first Asian American elected to the county’s five member governing board, is sworn into office on Jan. 3 by the honorable Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Adrienne Nelson.

housing costs are pushing people of color, immigrants and refugees and low-income families further east.

Commissioner Loretta Smith, elected to represent north Portland, takes pride in her roots in the African American community and her role of representing diverse and disadvantaged residents. Serving as an “ambassador” lands on her shoulders.

“You have to serve two communities,” she said. “When people see someone who looks like them,

they want to engage. They think you’re more apt to listen. There’s an expectation that we’ll be more receptive to their needs, that it will define how we administer public policy, and how we spend our resources.”

Smith has heard concerns about a lack of access to social services for families in east Portland, and she pushed to implement the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative, providing culturally specific, community-based services for kids of color.

Shortly after being elected in 2010, Smith held a town hall meeting for African American men and more than 300 attendees expressed their frustration over the lack of summer jobs for teens. So she created the Summerworks internship program. What started with 25 kids has grown to provide jobs to more than 500 young people a year.

For the first time, last summer, Smith saw the seeds of that advocacy. An intern told her, “I want to be you.”

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