

George Eighmey

SR 11434, Oral History,

By Juliet Salvato & Sarah Kinney

Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN)

2009 February 15



EIGHMEY: George Eighmey

JS: Juliet Salvato

SK: Sarah Kinney

Transcribed by: Juliet Salvato & Sarah Kinney, ca. 2009

Audit/edit by: Pat Young, ca. 2009

Reviewed by George Eighmey, ca. 2009

This oral history interview was conducted as part of the Portland State University LGBT History Capstone course, Winter Term 2009, with Instructor Pat Young.

Introduction

George Eighmey's involvement in politics in the gay and lesbian movement starting back from the 1980s to present day.

Session 1
2009 February 15

EIGHMEY: George Eighmey, February 15, 2009 and this is a recap, I think my involvement in politics in the gay and lesbian movement probably starting back in the 1980s when I moved here.

In 1984 I started getting involved with the Ladd's Addition Neighborhood Association. It did not have anything to do with gays and lesbians, but then as part of being president of the Ladd's Addition Conservation District I got involved with representing the neighborhood against Southland Corporation, to redesign the 7-11 that happens to be on corner of SE 20th & SE Hawthorne, it is the most unique 7-11 because it is not a box, it has two entries and it is also set forward not back. That enabled me to start meeting people in the neighborhood and meeting a lot of other gay couples in Ladd's Addition. At that time it was considered run down and very accessible for people to buy and of course once gays and lesbians start to move in (laughs)...it starts increasing the values, and as it happened on this block alone there at three gay couples on the other block over there another three. The homes had improved, the values go up and we became more active in the neighborhood. Then we started noticing certain things started happening; reading about some of the police action - they were raiding the gay bars...kids were being beaten up ...we had the skinheads marching up and down SE Hawthorne in boot steps.

We had swastikas painted on our steps...things were...tense. We thought we had to start doing something. I got involved first in the gay men's chorus, got involved in going to events...met young Thomas Lauderdale when he was 16 years old, when Pink Martini just started and he was a brilliant young boy. A group of us started mingling, started to have socials. There was a group called the Cascade Guild. It was a combination of lawyers and doctors and other professionals. It was primarily a social group, sort of a networking

support group as well, but then a few of us in the late 1980s said, we need to do more. We have to start trying to help each other in business so we formed...well actual what happened first we talked about it and never got around to it. Then 1988 occurred. 1988 was Lon Mabon's first initiative to overturn then governor Goldschmidt's executive order prohibiting discrimination based upon sexual orientation for government employees...just government employees.

Well Lon Mabon gathered enough signatures to put it on the ballot and they won...it overturned the governor's order. Eventually, lawyers got involved and we were able to overturn that as unconstitutional, but it was a wake up call for all of us, realizing that there were people out there who were seriously opposed to having gay rights in any shape or form. So then I think the first thing in 1989 OGALLA was formed here in our living room (laughs)...in this living room with about ten of us sitting around. OGALLA stands for Oregon Gay and Lesbian Law Association. And then also started around that time was the equity foundation and Cascade Aids had already started. Our house was just starting; back then, I think in 1988 was the first one. So it was starting to gel; there were all these little groups...Bonnie Tinker also just formed Love Makes a Family. Just Out finally was becoming more of a newspaper instead of sort of a through away rag. And because we had this wake up call from 1988 and really didn't organize to fight it, we just assumed the backers of the initiative were so stupid...nobody is going to vote to overturn the rule...well we were wrong.

So then I got more and more active. I got active at Our House because I saw too many young men dying terrible deaths and Our House needed finances and I was at the beginning of that movement. Started getting involved in OGALLA more, I became the Treasurer and became active in that. Speaking out...and then I think the next one was 1992. In 1992 was Measure 9...Measure 8 was in 1988..yes that is right. It was the most egregious type of bill or proposition that you could think of because it had required that homosexuality was declared to be deviant, dangerous, all of these things and that we

were pedophiles. Well that really got me involved (laughs)...we formed a group with a bunch of lawyers called Oregon Speak Out. Oregon Speak Out was a training program for speakers, we would train speakers and then we would go out and get them a speaking engagement, so we had three ring binders full of all kinds of speeches, guides, how to talk and how to reach out to the public to get speaking engagements. So we would sit on the phone and just call schools, civic organizations, churches, you name it we would call them and say we can provide you with a speaker and we will also give you the number of the opposition because we know you have to have a fair and balanced approach.

Well we knew that Lon Mabon at that time, the OCA (Oregon Citizens Alliance), did not have enough speakers, we knew that. We had enough speakers, we knew if we offered them our telephone number that about fifty percent of the time they never showed up, so we had the platform to ourselves and we could educate the public. We would always say we are more than willing to have somebody on the other side. In fact, I preferred to have somebody on the other side because when I spoke at Lincoln High School it was Lon Mabon and one of his lieutenants and there arguments were so bizarre that the audience just laughed. The moderator who was a friend of mine, a lawyer, who taught constitutional law at Lincoln, when Lincoln High School won five years in a row for the US Constitutional arguments in D.C. all of the time. He said you have to respect the speakers and if you laugh or clap, I am going to take a minute away from the other speaker and so (laughing) they were taking minutes away from me...He (Lon Mabon) would say things such as...well did you know it was a fact that homosexuals eat more feces than any other group in the United States. And I mean you just shake your head...or that gay men kill more gerbils than any other group in the United States. And I would ask the simple question of where do you get these facts? Who did this study? (laughs). But it was ridiculous sometimes the arguments they would use.

So we really formed then...organized and got together and that is when the Right to Privacy as it was first called, really took off then. And then that is when we started to have big rallies and raising money and we were a force and we defeated it.

The next on was 1994...in between 1992 and 1994 The legislator from this district resigned, she ran for Multnomah County Chair and won and then that seat was open and the rules are that the County Commissioners appoint, we have five County Commissioners, and they appoint from a slate of three recommended by the Democratic Party. So a group of prominent gays, Don Powell, Terry Bean and several others...lets see who else...Reeves. They came to me and asked me to throw my hat in...I said well...I still remember the meeting there was a restaurant on Burnside and we went to it and they were all talking about the strategies and everything and I said wait and minute, wait a minute...Not a single one of you have asked my politics, I might be a rabid Republican for all you know...they said yeah sure from what you have been doing (laughs)...I said well I want you to know I've got independent ideas, I am an environmentalist, I believe in human rights, but I am also a tax and spend liberal. I will raise taxes on cigarettes, I will raise taxes on liquor, I will raise taxes on property, I will raise taxes because I want to fund our schools, I want to fund our programs. So as long as you know that (laughs)...ok lets talk about it...they said ok fine. Then we started planning.

So I had my first task...was to go before the Democratic Party and you had to go around and lobby all of these representatives. I sent out a thousand flyers and then I had to call former legislators and elected officials and get my name out there. So I was one of the three (for County Commissioner). The other one that was more likely to beat me than anyone else was Diane Rosenbaum, who happens to be a State Senator right now, because she had labor backing. I had professional backing...the lawyers the doctors...actually I ended up getting the educators too. So then once that was done we had the three of us...the third person was really not involved...I can't even remember the person's name they just did not show up or do stuff. So it was Diane and I and we had to

go through the County Commissioners. Well we lobbied the County Commissioners for two weeks before that vote. We met with them, we wined and dined them, and we tried to see what their points of view were to sell ourselves. Then we each gave our speech to the County Commissioners and the vote was 3:2 in my favor. It really shocked people I was the first openly gay male to be appointed to the House of Representatives. There was a woman...you knew that...ok she (Gail Shibley) was there about six months before me, so she was the first openly lesbian woman and I was the first openly gay male. It shocked people and Diane Rosenbaum was very very disappointed, so I told her that when my time is up you can run for my spot. So that was the beginning and then of course 1994 and we had the battle with Lon Mabon and we won again...and 2000 then 2004..God so many of them.

The legislative session was six years and I was term limited out, I was caught in a gap, where if I had been elected just one year earlier or one year later, I would have been ok, I would still be there today. Because...well there was nobody, I mean my voting record fit this area. I use to always joke...when I sent out a survey to this district which incorporates from the river...it use too...all the way up to SE 39th to Foster over to the Interstate over there...about 55,000 residents and I sent out a survey and I use to always ask what are you major concerns. Schools, safety, prisons, roads, what taxation, then I use to always leave a space...if none of the above what would you say. That was always number one...what would you say...number one was legalize marijuana (laughs). I don't care about schools, I don't care about...just legalize marijuana. So I got medicinal marijuana passed back in 1997, that was a state wide initiative that we got on the ballot and was able to pass it. So I got half way there, I did not get to legalize it. We did get it reduced to under one ounce...just a sort of a fine. So it is a very liberal district and it was sometimes an embarrassment of riches...there are two streets here in SE Portland, where at that time...I do not know if it is still true...it is 33rd and 34th where about half the block is owned by lesbians. And so I had these signs...my signs would be up this whole block...it was just embarrassing (laughing)...they would say...God nobody else's signs are anywhere and in

this district I use to get 78-80%. Then the Socialist would come in second, and then the Communists would come in third, Republicans would come in dead last (laughing)...Republicans would be lucky to get 2%. We were concerned with this last decade about Ladd's Addition, because Ladd's Addition became very expensive, suddenly the prices just skyrocketed. We were thinking oh my God Republicans will start moving in. Well as it turned out...no, just the rich Democrats kept moving in (laughs) and it is still pretty dominantly, 80%... about 80% of this district...this area is registered Democrat and in fact there is one guy over here I know quite well on Holly and he had a Bush/Cheney sign in his yard and I walked up to him and said how are you doing...he said fine...I said do you feel kind of lonely in the neighborhood (laughing)...he looked to his sign and he said yeah, but at least my folks in Gresham still vote for them...well that is true.

So then I got more involved...I had to resign from Our House because time wise it was just too much and then I got involved in trying to change some legislation. Several pieces of legislation where I learned very quickly that you had to work with the Republicans because they controlled everything. When I was in the legislator they were the dominate party. The only thing we had in our favor was a Democrat Governor. I worked with Governor Roberts, I worked with Kitzhaber those were the two Governors I worked with. I became the minority whip...which was a lot of jokes in there. Then I became the Democratic Senior Party Leader and then I was Vice Chair of Judiciary Committee, so that gave me a lot of latitude. That is when...what we call ENDA, the Employment Non Discrimination Act came up based on sexual orientation and there was one Republican Representative Chuck Carpenter who was openly gay...he came in after me. The two of us worked together on trying to get this bill passed...what we did...we had twenty nine Democrats so we needed two Republicans and I said your responsibility...I had Chuck...I said you've got to get me one more (laughs). And so when the bill...ahh...John Minnis's whose wife eventually became Speaker of the House...very very conservative, John Minnis's best known in the 1993 legislature when the gay men's chorus sang because

Barbara Roberts had them sing at the opening ceremonies, he stood on his chair and turned his back to the gay men's chorus he was so offended. So when I go there I started joking and I said I am going to give John Minis the bravest man award because he turned his butt to sixty gay men (laughing) and of course he did not like that at all so when he was the Chair of the Judiciary Committee and I was Vice Chair he would not release my bill...the Employment Non Discrimination Bill based on sexual orientation, so I went to Chuck and I said to Chuck we can pull it to the floor if we get thirty one votes and he said ok I will get one Republican but you have to get all of the Democrats...and I said ok, if I have all of the Democrats I will come out of the caucus and raise my thumb and that is the signal for you to stand up and announce to the speaker that you are pulling the bill to the floor which is unheard of by the way. Legislatively it is unheard of to pull a bill to the floor from committee, because committee's in Oregon control everything, they control whether a bill is going to be voted on or not voted on, it can be buried forever. Well I went into the caucus of the Democrats and I had three Democrats who were very conservative...I made my pitch on two of them and the last one was Lonnie Roberts who is now a County Commissioner now...he termed limited out now. After giving my most persuasive argument, Lonnie finally agreed to vote for the bill. So I went out on the floor and I raised my thumb, Chuck stood up and said Mr. Speaker...immediately the speaker gaveled the meeting adjourned...the session adjourned. The Republicans ran to the parking lot and started driving away in droves so we could not have a quorum. They left the building and for two days we shut down the legislature...Chuck and I. They called us in and said what do you want?...what do you want? We said you know what we want. You can't keep this up...you two can't keep this up...you're disrupting the states business. I said well this is the state's business as far as we are concerned.

Well on the second day they said alright here is the compromise...we will let it go to committee and we will let the committee vote on it. We knew we had the votes in committee because the one other Republican he (Chuck) got was in that committee (laughs). So it went to committee, got out of committee, went to the floor and was voted

on and actually passed...overwhelmingly. Then our next chore was to go to the Senate. The Senate was control by the Republicans as well, so that was Gordon Smith. Gordon Smith well any rate Gordon Smith was not the best friend...and then I think I worked with Adams then also...He required that we have sixteen signatures on the bill from the Senate side, so I went around and I got sixteen signatures...went to him and said here they are; now you have to vote on it...and he said, oh no this one signature is not valid...I said what are you talking about it is not valid, it's valid....No he asked me to withdraw it. Of course I knew what they were doing. I could not do anything about it, so it failed in the Senate with a 15:15 vote...it fails when you do not get a majority so we lost it until the last legislation session ten years later...took that long to do it.

But we were able to pass a lot of bills that helped sexual minorities as well as the general community. One was a bill where if you were at home and had to receive an injection, you could only get an injection by a doctor, a nurse or a family member by blood or marriage. And I said wait a minute, why should I pay for a doctor, nurse if I got to get an injection, because this is...actually people with AIDS were getting injections at that time. I said why should we have to have a family member by blood or marriage what if I appoint somebody...well they said no you can't do that. So I introduced a bill...I went up to this conservative legislator and I said certain individual rights are not here and he agreed with me and he signed on and it passed. So now you can appoint somebody...a friend, a neighbor who is knowledgeable enough to come over and give you an injection. Then there was the cross adoptions...When a married couple who each have a child from a different marriage or not married...they had the children from when they were single. They can cross adopt those two children and then can become the children of that couple. Before the law passed, before we were able to pass it...those married couples only had to pay \$1500...there was a pre home visit and a post home visit. But a gay couple, an unmarried couple, whether gay or not, they had to have four home visits because they said for each child...because they were not married...each child was separate. I said that makes absolutely no sense...absolutely. Those children are going to

be living in that home and they are to be living in the same home...and their argument was that they were different homes. I said no they are the same building and the same structure...they said the child is living with this parent and the child is living with this parent....and I said yes same home...same as a married couple. But this was mostly lesbian couples who were paying \$3000 for an adoption...a neighbor of mine right down the street had to pay \$3000. I said this is ridiculous so we got that passed and now they are treated the same.

JS: And what year was that?

EIGHMEY: 1997...and then in 1997 we also got the...Disposition of Remains Bill passed. Up until that point if one was to die, and of course I ran into this all the time at Our House, if one was to die there remains were to be disposed of by the decision of the nearest living relative by blood or marriage and I saw a lot parents swoop down on a couple that had been together for years and years and say you can not go to the funeral....we are taking the remains back to Ohio where we will bury him ...whatever the case may be. And they were denying long term couples the right to even participate in the ceremony. I saw it many of times...they blocked him...I went to events because of who I was because...they could not block me, because they did not want to make a scene, but I would see them block the partner at the door and say no you can't come in. Of course what I would do is be brazen and say well he is with me and they can't...(laughs)...you want to make a scene go ahead because I will be on the front page and I will let you know I'll be on the front page and your going to be on the front page...saying your denying this because you're a homophobe.

So we were able to pass it, now you can appoint or decide yourself how your remains will be disposed of...because before you could not even decide yourself even if you put it in writing you could not decide...I want my remains buried, I want my remains cremated, nope. The only trouble we had was with the funeral homes; Basically, the funeral homes

said, "Well, are you going to take away the services?" I said, no, you can have your services. If somebody wants to pay for services and have a memorial service, that's fine, I don't care. But, you've got to dispose of the remains the way the person wants them to, if they can afford it. If they can't afford it then you know, then you can't... if you say, I want a gold casket, I'm sorry, but, unless you've got the money you're not going to get a gold casket. I was able to get a conservative on that by saying, you can dispose of your real property, you can dispose of your personal property, you can even dispose of the parts of your body, your eyes, your liver, your heart, but the one thing you cannot get rid of on your own, somebody else decides, is what's left over. And he said, "That's not right." And he signed on with me, and it passed just like that, after I got the funeral home satisfied because I told them, go ahead, spend the million dollars, I don't care. But most gay people are cremated. That's the general rule that I see in our community.

So... I was able to get those behind the scenes where all this headline stuff was still going on out there in front, where Chuck and I would be on the front page, and stuff like that. And then, uh... that was the last session. And then I was term-limited out and endorsed Diane Rosenbaum, and she's been in there ever since. She first got in ninety-nine, I think it was, yeah, ninety-nine. So she's been in ten years now.

So, then we did other things with OGALLA, we did the... with Mayor Katz, we did the thousand years of commitment ceremony at city hall. What that was, was we said... we wanted to show the public that gay couples were committed to each other in long term relationships. And this was way before the Marriage Act passed, or anything like that, way before the county commissioners passed marriage in Multnomah County. So what we did, we had couples sign-up, and we had... all the bakeries in town donated the most fabulous wedding cakes you could imagine, we placed them strategically throughout the city hall, we had a band, we had the mayor speak, we had city council members speak, we had county commissioner speak. And basically, it was... we wanted to have people sign up who were in committed relationships, and totaled the numbers, to see if we could

get a thousand years of commitment. Well, we got two thousand years of commitment. So, uh... and we recognized the oldest couple, they had been together fifty four years. They were an older couple and it was very nice, very nice. So that's one of the publicity type things that we did. We worked with Sam Adams for years for The Q Center, to get that launched. We met, God, we met so many times with Sam when he was assistant to mayor. And then, um... what else did we do. We got, then as you know, Right to Pride became HRC, or no, not HRC, became... how soon I forget. The present one...

JS: Isn't it just Pride? Or...

EIGHMEY: No, no... it was Right to Privacy, then it became Right to Pride, and now it is... Basic Rights Oregon. About ninety-seven, ninety-eight. It was the last year I got the award from Right to Pride, that was such a nice thing they did for me. It was a thousand people at the convention center, and they did a video of my life, and it was so nice. It was... well, I had... I was awed, because my kids conspired on that one, they put together, helped get pictures and stuff. It was very nice, very nice. I'll never forget that one.

Then, I ran for county commissioner, and lost, against Diane Lynn. That was in ninety-eight. And, at that point I decided, okay what am I going to do. Am I going to go back to practicing law, or do something else, and so... I was on the board of Compassion in Dying of Oregon, which is now Compassion & Choices of Oregon. And the board said, well, how about becoming our executive director? And, I said I could do it half-time, because I'm going to still practice law a little bit, because I've got a bunch of clients that I've got to keep handling. So, for about two years, I worked half-time as a lawyer, and then half-time as the executive director. Then we went off, then Compassion and Choices really starting growing, because more people started...umm. So I resigned, I didn't resign I just quit practicing law. After twenty eight years, I figured that was long enough.

Actually, since then it's just been fifty, sixty hours a week at Compassion & Choices of Oregon. We started off with the idea that we would always provide our services free of charge, because people are dying. They come to us because they want guidance at the end of life. We get them into hospice care, we get them into pain management, and for those who wish to hasten their death, we give them alternatives, such as voluntarily stop eating and drinking, and palliative sedation, which is sedating the person until they die. Or, for those who wish to use Oregon's Death with Dignity, we guide them through the process of using Oregon's Death with Dignity Act. We work with their doctors, with their hospices, and their pharmacies. We have a team of about thirty volunteers throughout the state. We assign a person to guide them through the process. I generally work with the doctors. To get them all lined up, to make sure that everything is done right. We give speaking engagements throughout the state. We had forty presentations last year, and we've already had about seven this year. We helped with the Washington State Initiative. Former Governor Barbara Roberts and I have joined together in doing a lot of stuff, speaking engagements in particular. She's a strong advocate of the law, because that's really where it began, with her husband. Her husband, Frank Roberts was senator when I became a legislator... when I started in ninety-three. And he had been a senator for fifteen years or so. But he introduced the first bill for Death With Dignity, it got nowhere, got nowhere... and then in ninety-four when the group of us started going around getting petitions signed, we got it on the ballot in ninety-four, passed the first time, then we were in court for three years. Then I became the spokesperson throughout the state in ninety-seven, because they sent it back to the people to vote on again, we passed it the second time overwhelmingly. Then, the U.S. Congress was involved for the next three years trying to overturn it, so we were working very closely with Sen. Ron Widen, who kept promising he would filibuster it, so it didn't get passed in Congress, it got passed in the House side but it never got to the Senate, it never got through the Senate.

Then in 2001, US Attorney General Ashcroft wrote a directive, saying that any doctor in the state of Oregon who wrote a prescription under Death with Dignity would be subject

to criminal prosecution and have their license to prescribe taken away. So the next day, we were able to get ten of our clients, and we sued him, and we got an injunction, and it took five years, but the U.S. Supreme Court overturned John Ashcroft. That was in 2006, and we have not had a battle since 2006. It literally took twelve years of battles, from courts to Congress, to Ashcroft, to U.S. Supreme Court, before our law finally was upheld. So, the last couple of years it's been difficult to fundraise because we don't have an enemy anymore. (laughs) When you have an enemy, it's easier to fundraise. So Washington came along, and they placed the Death with Dignity Act on their ballot, and then the enemy came out of the woodwork again. They just came out in droves. You know, their motto was, contain it to Oregon, the disease is in Oregon, keep it to Oregon. Don't let the disease spread to other states. Well, they were wrong, because now Washington has it, Montana has it, so we have three states that have Death with Dignity now, and it looks like Vermont, and Maine, and Hawaii, there's a possibility there. Once we start getting those it's going to be the domino effect, and I think we'll probably never get the Southern States.

SK: Can you explain a little bit what Death with Dignity is?

EIGHMEY: Yes, Death With Dignity is the right of an adult person who has a terminal disease that two doctors say will end their life in six months or less, that the person is mentally competent, that they've been told all of their alternatives, such as hospice care, palliative care, chemo, radiation, and that person to pursue their option of hastening their death. They must make two oral requests, a minimum of fifteen days apart, they must make a written request, where their signature is witnessed by two people, and they must be able to self-administer. That means nobody can inject them, nobody can pour it down their throat, they must be able to do it themselves. The medicine is about six ounces of a liquid, and they have to be able to drink it themselves, and death occurs within, generally an hour. Coma occurs within a couple minutes. So, that's the right to die with dignity.

JS: I wanted to back up just a bit and talk a little bit about... you know, you won as an out gay man. What kind of response did you get from the public?

EIGHMEY: Surprisingly, that's why I was emphasizing the sort of liberal nature of this district. It was overwhelmingly positive. The only negatives that I got were in ninety-five when I was going door to door, because the first time I didn't have to run, I was appointed. But in ninety-five I had to run, so I went door to door. And I knocked on a lot of doors. And maybe, I ran into a half a dozen at the most, who knew me and said, we don't believe in your lifestyle. Or, one guy who said, you people are weird, but other than that it really wasn't bad. The worst that happened was with the politicians who believed everything that I brought up had to be gay. I can still remember when I introduced my first bill, a new legislator always has a maiden bill, it was a tax bill. I was on the Judiciary Committee... it was an ordinary tax bill. So I stood up and said, this is to reconnect dada... and this one legislator stood up and said, "The black cloud of evil is crossing the capital...", huh? (laughs) The speaker of the house said, "For what purpose do you rise?" (laughs) And the guy said, "Evil is in this building." And I thought, wow! And so the speaker, thank goodness, who was a republican, said "you may sit down, you are out of order." And so he let me continue. But that's the extent of opposition. So, I did something I probably should not have done. I then wanted to see how far I could push this guy. My office was like, about three doors down from the men's room. I told my staff, I said whenever you see that representative go to the bathroom, tell me. And so, he goes in the bathroom, and I rush out, and I stand next to him, and I said "How ya doing!" (laughs) And he was stunned, the poor guy would just panic, he didn't know what to do, he didn't know what to do. (laughs) It was so sad. But you know, it was my way of just sort of getting humorous. I did some things that were kind of silly sometimes.

Like one time with Margaret Carter, who is a senator, black woman. It was one of the hottest days, and the air conditioner broke in the Capital, so we were allowed to wear casuals, instead of suit and ties. And so people were coming in, and Margaret stood up

and said, "Mister Speaker, I am very glad that it's hot today because I get to see all of these men's nice legs, especially John Minnis'." And I stood up and I said, "Mister Speaker, ditto." (laughs) So, it was kind of funny.

So it really wasn't, except for the opponents and Lon Mabon type people, I even spoke at the Four Square, which is Four Square Church over here off Burnside, which is in the district. There was a little uneasiness there, they were trying to sort of reform me, (laughs) and then there's the Hinson Baptist Church over here, where they had the black box, where gays put their hands in that, and they get an electric shock if they see a male nude, then they stop it when they put up a picture of a naked woman. That's supposed to cure you, of course. Well it's stupid, silly stuff like that. So I really didn't, maybe occasionally, um, a weird phone call or something.

But, because I was who I was, I got actually more attention. I mean we were invited to the White House, and Clinton... we were the first gay couple to dance at the White House, openly gay couple. And, then we got to Christmas dinner, and... inauguration in ninety-six, actually ninety-seven, we were invited to attend that. Peter and I went to that. I made a stink, (laughs) one time I visited the White House, with a group of openly gay legislators, and we were greeted at the gate by the guards, all of whom started putting on latex sort of gloves. And I said, "Why are you putting on latex... because I was sort of the leader of the group. And he said, "Well our boss said we could get things from you." And I said, "I can tell you I'm not going to kiss you, and you're not going to get it from my briefcase... so who's idea was this?" And they said, "Well, it's our boss." So I said, "Send him over." And he came over, and he said, "Is there something wrong?" And I said, "Yes." I explained. He said, "Well, if you've got a problem with that, you just don't have to come in." I said, "I don't have a problem that I can't resolve later." So, my friend, actually Abner Mikva a US representative from Illinois who I met while in law school. He was the president's lawyer, and we had this briefing with all of the Secretaries of this and Secretaries of that... about the Ryan White bills, and gay rights bills, and all of the stuff

that we wanted and were concerned about. And at the end of which, uh, Abner said is there anything else, I raised my hand, yes George what is it? And I told him about the incident. I said, "Does the White House really wish to project an image, inviting openly gay legislators to the White House, and then treating us in that manner." And it was incredible, because that night, they had a reception for us.

And, uh, Al Gore came into the reception, and I was at the other end of the room, he was, he came in this door, and I saw his assistant point me out. And he walked across this whole room, with his hand, so the cameras are flashing, so... shaking my hand. So, (laughs) it was obvious that he was not afraid. So the next day Peter picked me up at the airport, and said, "What the hell did you do?" I said, "What, I didn't do anything." And he said, "Every newspaper in the nation is on our answering machine. LA Times, NY Times, Chicago Trib, Miami Herald, everyone wants to know... interview you. What did you do?" I said, " I didn't, I didn't..." (laughs). Well, then the President through his aide, asked if I wanted them fired. And I said no, I do not want anybody fired. I want sensitivity training. They have to understand how you get AIDS, if that's their lack of education in the nineties... this is foolish, I mean we've known for years. So, that's all that happened to that one. And, it did make the newspapers a lot.

So, like I say, it's not... it was a plus in many ways. And Gail Sibley, the woman, and I got a lot of publicity because we were the first two. Then, by then, ninety-seven, there were five of us, openly gay in the legislature. Which is the high water mark, we had more openly gay legislators in Oregon ... than any other state. Of course, now we're down to none, oh one. Yeah, Tina Kotek. Well, of course Kate Brown. Kate Brown's secretary of state now, but she's bi. Yeah, she always likes to say, "I'm bi." I say okay, whatever, whatever you want, whatever suits you. I also, when I was a legislator had the most diverse staff of any legislator. I had straights, gays, trans, uh... mixed race. And, as it turned out, which I didn't know, I had an intern, who was a student at Willamette University. And she was the most beautiful young lady.

And so, whenever I came up from the floor of the House, back to my office, there would be this bevy of guys all around. They were all the clerks of other legislators, and they would all want to be talking to her. (laughs) And I said, uh, how can I use this? (laughs) And I told her, I said, "I'm going to use you, if you don't mind." She said, "No, I don't mind." So, I mean, it was great because I could get communications, I could see representative so... would you send your clerk over, I've got to go over something. Oh, the clerk would just... (laughs) yes I'll come over, I'll come over. let me come over. So I got them to work with me a lot easier that way. But, I also had a post-trans, who, she was just wonderful. Post from male to female, and she became a lawyer, and I was able to honor her at a reception where she was able to get the Oregon Department of Labor to categorize, uh, pre-op transsexualism as a disability so it was covered under the insurance policy. And so I honored her, and sadly six months later, she shot herself. Uh, it was just sad. She was so good and such a good lawyer, but she just couldn't take it.

JS: And what was her name?

EIGHMEY: Google me, and you'll see it under the... That must've been in ninety-five. I'll still remember, she was in my office, and I can still remember talking to her, she said it's tough George, it's tough. Hmm. Sad. Uh... (pause) So what else?

JS: So, what were, I mean, a lot of those were highlights. And what do you think was the biggest achievement being in the House? I mean, what were you really...

EIGHMEY: I think the achievement, if there was one, was not any one particular act or decision, it was my presence. Because, as I told the caucus, a lot of times, you all have your issues. One labor, one animals, another one environment, another one schools, another one this, another one that. I said, when you bring your issues up, you speak from the heart, and knowledge, and well-informed, but would any of you ever bring up gay

rights on your own. Even though you're supportive, and I will respect you for that, but would you have brought that up as a number one issue? But for me present here, I'm the one who brings it up. And I said, so being at the table makes the difference. Sincerely makes a difference. Tina Kotek, last session I would say even though it passed, everything passed last year, that session, I don't think it would have. It wouldn't have been high on their radar screen if it hadn't had been for her pushing it and pushing it. They're all supportive, and I agree with it, but it's not high on their priority list. Why should it be? It's not... because it doesn't affect them. Black issues the same way, racial issues, we've got black senators and representatives, and because they're there, it brings it right up. It's the diversity, being at the table that if there's one thing that's significant, that's it.

JS: Well, I do appreciate your time. Is there anything else you wanted to say, for the record.

EIGHMEY: That's about it.

[End of Session 1]
[End of Interview]

Keywords

George Eighmey

Oregon Politics

Homosexuality

Measure 9

OGALLA

Our House

Cascade Aids

Ladd's Addition

Oregon Speak Out

OCA

Right to Privacy

Employment Non Discrimination Act – ENDA

Disposition of Remains Bill