

SHERRY HARRIS

ON A MISSION

Sherry Harris wants white lesbians and gays to hear something: The mainstream gay movement has a lot to gain by including African Americans in its leadership roles.

The benefits, according to the Seattle city councilwoman, go way beyond a swelling of the ranks. "I have come to believe that one of the biggest barriers to gay and lesbian people to achieve civil rights is our inability to see ourselves as one community, united to confront the challenge of discrimination," Harris told an audience of grass-roots political organizers gathered in Oakland, Calif., three days before last November's election.

Harris personifies a rift that she and many others say still exists. While she often says, "I am here to say that I do not want to serve alone," she remains the only African-American, lesbian elected official in America, a challenge that Harris has met head-on since winning her 1992 bid for the Seattle city council. "Little did I know that the gay and lesbian civil rights movement was going to be taking off and, in being elected, I was going to be thrust right into the middle of that."

And what this former engineer has learned while in the fishbowl of gay political life is a deceptively simple lesson for gays and lesbians of color: Come out, come out, wherever you are. "Invisibility equals death for our movement. I can't tell you how very, very important that is for us to be visible and to be leaders in this gay and lesbian civil rights movement." For example, she noted that most of the faces of her gay sisters and brothers at Stonewall 25 in New York were white.

"When I think about the impact that we can have, we

have no other choice but to become 'gay,'" she said. The numbers alone would make waves, Harris feels. "If every gay person in every Black Baptist church were to come out, at the very least they'd lose all the choir," she said with characteristic humor. But before any of this can happen, segregation must end within a political movement that claims to work toward universal civil rights, and the African-American gay and lesbian community must commit to organizing, she said. "That's something that the broader gay community does not understand — that we have a challenge within the broader gay community of seeing ourselves as connected, and once we are connected, we can move through this movement and through this hatred and win this battle in a unified way.

"By being leaders in the broader gay community, we can help others to make that connection, to make that claim and to make them see that united we stand and divided we fall."

The message Harris wants most to get across, however, is that gay pride has to become a way of life for everyone. She told the group gathered for a reception for the Victory Fund and the East Bay Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club in Oakland, "The closet isn't there anymore. It's a facade, it's gone. We do not have that safety net. If you think for one moment that you can retreat into the closet and if you don't tell anyone about yourself that you'll be OK, I'm here to say that the movement has changed.

BY MARY ANN SWISSLER

"The level of hatred toward gay people and the desire to focus that in an open and affirming way by trying to pass laws that discriminate against us have gone way up. They have changed their tactics. You don't have the closet anymore. You cannot retreat. They will seek you out, and when they do find you, they will arrest you for an illegal relationship."

Harris credits the progressive voters of Seattle for giving her the space to run as an open lesbian and to continue work for the gay community once in office. "Citizens of Seattle really have a live-and-let-live attitude, so it makes it a good place for people, for a gay person, to run. I really felt that people judged me for who I was and what I had to give as a candidate for city council and not on my sexual orientation." Seattle practiced equal rights before Harris appeared on the scene, overturning two mandates which would have banned gay civil rights. First was Initiative 13, an attempt to strip away rights guaranteed in housing and employment. Second, in 1990, the city council tried to repeal domestic partnership benefits for city employees, a move rejected by a voter referendum.

Harris has been an example of the effective organizing that can be done after making it to the inside of the political mainstream: She helped form the first Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual group within the National League of Cities and led a council prohibition of city business and employee travel to Colorado following passage of Amendment 2; she pressed for city-sponsored needle exchanges and sought funding for gay youth centers. Devising a domestic partnership registration system now is a priority with Harris.

From the outset, coming out became a common-sense campaign strategy, Harris explained. "I wouldn't characterize myself prior to running as a very open person, but I also wouldn't say that I was closeted; it was something you knew about me if you had to know it. It never came up with the committee of people I was working with when I was doing transportation studies" as a volunteer advocate for a rail transit system in Seattle. Harris did tell the folks on the Seattle Women's Commission, she said, because of their mandate to work for the betterment of all women, including sexual minorities.

Campaign strategy involved contacting other gay elected officials. "And what we found out was that everyone recommended that we be open about it. If we were to try to run a closeted campaign, because I had been known to some people to be gay, my opponent could have used it against me. And I wanted to run on three issues: transportation, economic development and public safety. I didn't want to be talking about my sexual orientation, or my gender, or my race. I decided that if I would just lead with it and be open about it, I'd make it a non-issue, and my opponent could not start this whisper campaign."

Her hunches were right; neither the public nor her opponent gave sexual orientation a second thought. Not so with the Seattle press, Harris laments, calling the coverage monotonous. "I found that as my campaign went on, it was just a fascinating topic for the reporters," she said. "It was incredible: story after story and story about me being gay."

But Seattle voters were overwhelmed when the 40-something Harris outed herself, and they elected her for being a smart transportation engineer who knew her way around environmental, economic development and community issues.

Her feeling of personal responsibility toward her communi-

ty comes naturally, said Harris because she was always involved in civic activities while growing up in New Jersey. "I think that's a family value that I learned from my mother and my aunt, who were both very involved in the community when I was growing up, mostly through our church. I remember them always dragging me to meetings and helping them out with projects." As an older child, Harris served as a tutor.

"When I got older and out on my own, one the first things I did was look at how I could get involved as a volunteer. I've



PHOTO BY YUEN LUI STUDIO

had this 10-year experience of increasingly intense active involvement in a variety of different organizations, serving on boards and commissions, working on projects, working on proposals, on legislation." She first moved to Washington after being recruited by Boeing Aircraft, where she worked on 747s for five years before moving on to US West, where she was an engineer for a decade.

Beside the ability to work on progressive gay legislation, Harris said serving on the Seattle city council is exciting because she can bring to fruition some of the same projects that she worked on through citizen advisory groups.

It would be easy to say that Sherry Harris is a workaholic. It's two hours before midnight and Harris is keeping normal office hours, conducting an interview on her car phone and planning that weekend's 10th annual conference of the

International Network of Lesbian & Gay Officials, which she and openly gay Washington State Representative Cal Anderson are co-chairing this year. And yet, "stressed out" isn't a phrase that comes to mind. She is speaking about why she ran for office: "I had a passion for local government and the issues that were affecting my neighborhood, my community and the groups that I cared about," said Harris. Whether it's from years of grassroots community work or from a career that demands patience and critical thinking skills, Harris has developed a temperament designed for politics.

Of her re-election campaign for 1995, a year in which avowed liberals such as Harris will face the fight of their lives, her only comment is, "I know. I cannot believe the time has gone by so quickly."

BRINGING POLITICIANS

OUT

THE VICTORY FUND

The call for a national civil rights bill for lesbians, gays and bisexuals is getting louder, says Sherry Harris. However, the only way this will happen is not through lobbying gay-friendly elected officials, she and many others are saying, but by working to get our own people a seat at the table. This is the principle on which the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund has operated since 1991, recommending fifty-one candidates to a pool of contributors nationwide. Twenty-seven have won, and more than \$700,000 has been donated. And this year, despite the takeover by Republicans in both the House and the Senate, fourteen of twenty-seven candidates recommended through Victory Fund's campaign network won their seats. Harris will always occupy an historical niche with the Victory Fund: "She was our first," said deputy director Kathleen Athoen. "Sherry believed in herself and the people of Seattle, and she won."

The year ahead will be a busy one, conducting training seminars, recruiting new candidates and singing their praises. "We are going to recruit — and I love using that word in a gay context — more candidates for public office. That's all we do. We do it best," Athoen said.

When put on the ballot, women have

been winning at twice the rate of gay men: Eighty-one percent of the lesbians recommended by Victory Fund have won, compared to forty-two percent of the gay men. Still, the actual number of lesbian officials currently in office does not bode well for an increase in lesbian representation anytime soon. Either gay women are staying away from politics in droves (NOT!), or female politicians have a big closet problem. Only twenty-five elected officials, (five one-thousandths of a percent of the 497,155 elected officials in this country) call themselves lesbian, according to statistics available from the Victory Fund. Of the 7,461 state legislators, there are seven out lesbians, none among the 435 members of Congress nor any among the one hundred U.S. Senators.

Athoen said the importance of openly lesbian candidates cannot be stressed enough. "When an open lesbian runs for office, she comes out to thousands of voters, walking door to door, shaking hands, listening to people's concerns. And now, thousands more people know someone who is gay. And when that lesbian candidate is elected and her constituents see her representing them in the legislature and fighting for their rights, that's thousands more people who have a friend who is gay. All polls and focus groups show that people who know a lesbian or gay man are less likely to vote for anti-gay legislation."

Another advantage to Victory Fund's strategy is that the gay and lesbian community is becoming more compartmentalized and segmented; donating money to political candidates ensures support for issues that impact the community as a whole, said Berkeley, Calif., resident and former candidate Vicky Kolakowski. "It used to be that you could join a gay and lesbian professionals group. Now, there's gay and lesbian optometrists associations, or something."

Kolakowski added that she hopes Victory Fund sees the value of getting candidates elected to smaller boards and commissions, as well as going for the gusto with state and national campaigns. "We need to be at least putting people on school boards all over the place, and city councils and in utility districts and special districts, because these are the people who are going to be able to run later for Congress." Kolakowski, an engineer, attorney and religious studies graduate student garnered more than 50,000 votes

but still lost her bid for a seat on the Alameda County Transit Board. She said that she will continue her work as a statewide representative for the Democratic party.

The Victory Fund promotes six ways that lesbians can make a difference without going through the excruciating selection process that each Victory Fund candidate goes through: "Come out. Vote. Join the Victory Fund (\$100, followed by a minimum of two \$100 donations per year). Get involved in your local political club. Work on a campaign. Run for office."

The Victory Fund can be reached at 1012 14th St. NW, 7th floor, Washington, DC 20005; phone (202) 842-8679; e-mail victoryf@aol.com.

The following is a list of lesbians who have sought and won elections with the help of Victory Fund's recommendations list:

1994

Bonnie Dumanis,
San Diego Municipal Court

Sheila Kuehl,
California State Assembly

Susan Leal,
San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Teri Schwartz,
Los Angeles Superior Court

Victoria Sigler,
Dade County (Fla.) Court

Cynthia Wooten,
Oregon House of Representatives

1993

Shelley Gaylord,
Madison (Wis.) Municipal Court Judge

Jackie Goldberg,
Los Angeles City Council

Christine Kehoe,
San Diego City Council

Marilyn Shafer,
Manhattan (N.Y.) Civil Court Judge

1992

Tammy Baldwin,
Wisconsin State Assembly

Sherry Harris,
Seattle City Council

Gail Shibley,
Oregon House of Representatives

— Mary Ann Swissler