

# Coming out as a lesbian: Again

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by Anndee Hochman

**S**aadat, 51, says she hasn't gone overboard to hide her sexual orientation during 20 years of Portland activism, especially in her work with women's groups. But she hasn't advertised it, either. Coming out publicly, after all these years, was a difficult decision. The OCA helped her make it.

On a fall evening, when you can hear your voice echo in City Hall, Saadat is still in her office. She's formidable even when sitting down, her feet facing off with the floor, forehead scrunched in thought, hands sunk in the pockets of her magenta shirt. Then she tilts the chair back in amusement, her feet swinging off the floor; her laugh, low and broad, is as commanding as her indignation.

By coming out, Saadat hopes to create some bridges. Outside herself. Inside, too. She is taking her own counsel, doing something on a personal level, every minute that she lives. Beginning now.

"I think the Oregon Citizens Alliance is a threat to lots of different groups, not just lesbian and gay groups. It's pretty clear that I'm a woman, that I'm African-American. What I have not talked about in the past is being a lesbian. I bring all those things together in myself. By speaking out about who I am, all of the aspects of me, I may help people to understand more about building bridges and being connected.

"I had to think about it for a long time. I do feel that my personal business is my personal business. I haven't done a lot to hide who I am, but I haven't made a point of talking about it in certain circles. It feels a little like undressing in public. That makes me feel uncomfortable. But if undressing in public gets the job done, I'm willing to play Lady Godiva this one time.

"[What changed my mind] was being 50 years old and getting tired, in some situations, of using neutral pronouns or no pronouns at all. Also, working in an environment that is supportive; I have a supportive boss. And really thinking this issue's time has come. I don't want to be 75 years old and still thinking I should say something about the OCA.

"I've talked to people that I know and said to them, 'This is what's going to happen, and this is what I expect. I expect you to remind people that I'm the same person today that I was two weeks ago.' To a person, each one of them has given me a hug and said, 'You got it.' It's been pretty nice to have that support and reassurance.

"One friend asked me what it was I feared most [about coming out publicly] and I said, 'That people who used to hug me will stop hugging me.' I fear personal loss the most. Other than that, maybe some nut will write me a letter. I'm not inviting that, but somebody may decide I'm worthy of a letter or a phone call. I don't mind those things. It's the loss of personal friendship I fear.

"And that has happened in my life. People have said, 'Oh God, I can't be your friend anymore.' And that's very painful. I have been cursed, yelled at, screamed at, told I was the scum of the earth.

"Usually I just call people on the issue: 'You

## PROFILE



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

can't make that kind of joke here. You may talk that way somewhere else, but not here.' I made a very good friend doing that. He told me a gay joke. I looked at him and said, 'I'm gay.' He said, 'I'm sorry. That won't happen again.' And it didn't.

"I spent some time thinking: What can I do that will be effective in this fight against the OCA? I can go yell at a rally; I can go march. I will do those things. But it seemed to me that one of the strongest statements I could make was a statement about myself.

"I hear my grandmother, in my head, say sometimes, 'What makes you think you're so important?' That was always a put-down; [it meant] you were getting too out of hand. It was

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usually around some criticism you'd made of someone else, as if you had perfection under your belt.

"So I think that's one source of [my attitudes]. The other source is being in a family that had all different colors in it. We had people in our family who were very light-skinned; we had people in our family with a lot of Native American blood; I have cousins who are Hispanic and black.

"Believing in the possibility of unity for human beings keeps me looking for ways in which I am like other people. You can 'unique' yourself right out of the human race if you want to. But if the object is to be human and feel human, then you've got to let other people be human, too.

"Sexual interaction is not life; it's a part of life. If we can't be but one-dimensional, I think that's a very selfish way of looking at life.

"I can't work on just one thing. I can't go over

here and be with white people and say, 'Gay rights is the only issue.' I can't go with women and say, 'ERA is the only issue.' I can't go with African-Americans and say, 'Race is the only issue.' I have several issues tied up right in this person, right here.

"I want to be free of discrimination on all the levels appropriate to me. I'm older, I'm a woman, I'm obese, I'm African-American, I'm a lesbian. I want the freedoms. At the same time [I think], what are my responsibilities? My responsibilities are to protect the children, to try to protect the earth and the air I breathe, to be kind to older people and supportive, to participate in some way in the public process, in democracy, because I believe in it.

"I know there are a lot of gay men and lesbians on boards, on commissions, interacting with the public process. But a lot of people don't energize unless there's a threat. Is that the best we can get in a democratic process? I think we can get better.

"What am I proud of? The work on myself. The work that made me go back to school and finish college at 34-years-old. The work that makes me want to keep learning and changing. In terms of what goes on in the world, I guess I'm pretty pleased with some of the things I did as state affirmative action director. I got a chance to learn things about persuasion and oration.

"[Before moving to Portland], I was in St. Louis. I was 30 years old. I lived in a trendy part of town, the central west end. We started having real problems with burglars and break-ins. A friend sent me a clipping about gay rights organizing out here. St. Louis was pretty repressed.

"I came out here in 1970. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. I remember seeing the Columbia River for the first time, stopping the car and getting out, thinking, 'It's not muddy! It's not the Mississippi!'

"The community is more dissipated now, which I'm not sure is bad. There used to be institutions—alternative institutions. The Mountain Moving Cafe. The bookstore. There were women's bars; there were study groups. Seems to me we had a women's health collective. Rap groups. There was a lot of stuff going on.

"Now the institutions aren't there. There's no bar; there's no bookstore. Which could mean one of two things: One is that people aren't interested anymore because life has picked them up and given them some positive strokes and they don't find the need to be together because they don't

feel as oppressed. Or, they've gotten so depressed they're saying, 'What the hell; I don't want to do this anymore.'

"I miss the arguments and the challenges to thinking. I miss the interaction. I miss the fine distinctions that got made sometimes when you talked about something that you'd read. I miss the examination of issues, that kind of stuff. But I can't stay up three nights in a row and smoke and drink and talk politics and still get up and go to work in the morning.

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"Sometimes I talk to people about needing to start a school to teach younger people how to organize, how to put on a march or a rally, how not to get kind of ragged around the edges. It would also be fun to take a look at some of the issues of today—say, diversity.

"When you have a state or a nation, it's usually held together by some basic principles or ideas accepted by the populace. What happens when you have a nation as diverse as ours, and you start promoting diversity; what is it that we then substitute for what held us together in the past? It's an important discussion. Who's having it?

"I really believe in the possibility of world peace. I'm an optimist. It may not come in my lifetime. But I want to work on it. I want somebody to see it; I want somebody to have it.

"I guess it's basically a belief in the human spirit, knowing what it can survive. Having survived enough in my life to know that it only takes one move of your head, in one direction, to get another view of the world. And that view can change you and change the way you relate to people.

"[As a result of coming out publicly], I'd like to have the people I know who have been uncomfortable with the issue of homosexuality say, 'Gee, I wonder why I was uncomfortable. Maybe I better rethink my discomfort.' That would be great. I don't expect the world to change overnight, for this to make everybody go, 'Hallelujah.' But maybe just to get people to think, to think about the value of human beings.

"It's time to stop throwing one another away. We don't have to do all that. If people are mean to me, I can tell them they're being mean to me. I don't have to kill them. If we can raise a few generations without the idea that killing is the solution to a problem, we might see a brand new world."