



Inside the halls of power

Gays and lesbians have served the Carolinas well

by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

In the 1980s, the chances for any openly gay man or lesbian woman winning an election to public office were pretty much slim-to-none. That didn't stop scores of gay and lesbian North Carolinians from throwing their hat into the ring and giving it a shot.

With this year's candidacies of openly gay Mark Kleinschmidt for Chapel Hill mayor, Lee Sartain for Raleigh City Council and Owen Sutkowski for Charlotte City Council, LGBT Carolinians' attention has turned to queer politics and the history of the trailblazers who came before our modern day politicians.

Kleinschmidt, Sartain and Sutkowski have a wealth of LGBT political history preceding them. They stand on the successes, failures, lessons and legacies of the brave men and women who came before them.

Bob and Lightning

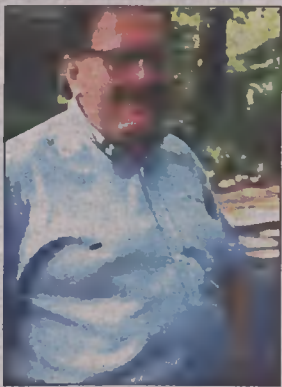
On August 25, 1981, openly gay N.C. State University graduate student Bob Hoy filed to run for the Raleigh City Council where just a generation before, arch-conservative Jesse Helms held office. Hoy was ultimately unsuccessful. Even *The Front Page*, North Carolina's most comprehensive gay and lesbian newspaper at the time, said Hoy wasn't a "serious contender."

The Front Page's writers changed their tune when Lightning A. Brown

came onto the scene, extolling his abilities and platform. Just weeks after Hoy filed to run in Raleigh, Brown filed to run for the Chapel Hill Town Council.

Come election day, neither Hoy nor Brown won. Hoy picked up only three percent of the vote in his primary. Brown picked up more than 1,400 votes in his primary, but ultimately failed to capture the 2,100 votes required to continue on to the general election.

Hoy's and Brown's candidacies are likely the first openly gay candidacies for public office in the Carolinas.



Joe Herzenberg in 1991.

'The Mayor of Franklin St.'

Brown's partner, Joseph Herzenberg, would go down in history. At the same time Brown was fighting for his chance to become Chapel Hill's first openly gay town councilman, Herzenberg — not yet out — lost his chance to continue serving on the council.

Herzenberg had run for the council before. In 1979, he was narrowly defeated. He was later appointed to the council when University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill student Gerry Cohen resigned. Trying to keep that seat in 1981, Herzenberg barely missed the mark, losing his seat in the same primary election that saw his partner's defeat.

That didn't stop Joe. In 1987, he ran again and won, becoming the state's first openly gay elected official. Serving until 1993, Herzenberg was instrumental in political organizing statewide and was a co-founder of the Equality North Carolina Political Action Committee.

He died of complications from diabetes at the age of 66 on Oct. 28, 2007.

Queen City politico

Robert Sheets, a president of the 1980s-era Queen City Quordinators (once the non-profit publishers of *Q-Notes*), was no newcomer to the political arena.

As a child, Sheets watched his mother serve on the Charleston, W.Va., City Council for 12 years. He served on the Kanawha County (W.Va.) Democratic Executive Committee for six years and ran unsuccessfully for county commissioner. After moving to Charlotte, Sheets managed the city



Julia Boseman speaks at an Equality North Carolina legislative panel with General Assembly colleagues Rep. Susan Fisher (D-Buncombe) and Rep. Paul Luebke (D-Durham).

Photo Credit: Equality NC

council campaign of Republican Jim Soukup.

In 1987, Sheets entered the Charlotte political scene as a candidate himself, running in the at-large primary race for Charlotte City Council.

While there was no hiding the fact that Sheets was openly gay, he wasn't too keen on the idea of being completely open.

Q-Notes reported, "He said that asked whether he is gay, he will reply, 'Would you ask such a damaging question of all candidates?'"

Sheets came in last against five other Democrats in the 1987 race. He tried once more in 1989, again unsuccessfully.

Liberal Triangle

North Carolina's Triangle — home to some of the state's most liberal cities and towns — have given the Carolinas a stew of most of its openly gay elected leaders.

Mike Nelson, elected in 1993 to the Carrboro Board of Aldermen, became the state's first openly gay mayor in 1995. He served five consecutive terms before moving to Hillsborough and running successfully for his current office as a member of the

Orange County Board of Commissioners.

In 2007, Nelson announced his intention to seek election to the N.C. Senate. Ultimately, he decided not to run after incumbent Democrat Ellie Kinnaird reversed her decision to retire. If he had run and been successful, Nelson

would have become the state's second openly gay or lesbian member of the legislature.

Nelson's former partner, Mark Kleinschmidt, who is running for Chapel Hill mayor, is in his second term on the town's council. First elected in 2001, Kleinschmidt will become the state's third openly gay mayor if successful this fall.

Right outside of the hustle and bustle of the inner Triangle area, openly gay Elic Senter was elected mayor of small town Franklinton, N.C., in 2007. A former teacher at West Forsyth High School in Winston-Salem, Senter moved back to his hometown of Franklinton to accept a position teaching at Wakefield High School in

see *Served on 21*

Sheets Enters Council Race

Robert Sheets, president of QCC in 1986, has entered the race against five other Democrats for the Charlotte City Council's four at-large seats.

Two will be eliminated in the primary election on Sept. 22; survivors will face four Republicans in the general election on Nov. 3.

Sheets said his reasons for running were that "I wanted to, and I feel that gay people have to be more involved in the decision-making process." He said that asked whether he is gay, he will reply, "Would you ask such a damaging question of all candidates?"

While he was president, QCC revived *Q-Notes*, arranged Charlotte's first gay skating night and bowling league, and founded Carolina Drummer.

Q-Notes' September 1987 article on Sheets' first run for Charlotte City Council

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A look at the Carolinas' MCCs

Timeless Pride
Part two of Q-Notes' LGBT Carolinas history