

# Bringing People Together

by Erik Sten

I've always had a deep belief that politics can bring people together. I first learned that growing up in Portland's Irvington neighborhood, when I often joined my mother going door-to-door for candidates and causes. It is that conviction that led me to run for Portland City Council in 1996.

When I returned home from Stanford University, my plan was to become a journalist, a profession that would join my interests in writing and public affairs. While trying to scratch out a living as a freelance writer, I began volunteering on City Commissioner Gretchen Miller Kafoury's campaign for City Council. I loved the work, and when she won, she offered me a job. In my five years on Gretchen's staff, I specialized in affordable housing and community issues. Eventually I became her chief of staff. It was a great time and a great learning experience, but by 1995 I began to consider what would come next for me.

At the same time, it looked as if two of the five City Council seats would be available. Mike Lindberg was retiring, and Earl Blumenauer had a very good chance of going to Congress.

In order to run for office—something I had considered doing, though not that soon—you must believe that you can make a substantial difference. I wasn't happy with the way things were going in city government. We were missing opportunities. We needed more focus on current problems. Many of the things that I took for

granted growing up in Portland—good schools, affordable housing, a clean environment—were slipping away from us as a result of growth and a lack of new leadership. Meanwhile, we were continuing economic development policies that didn't make sense to me in this economic climate. I decided to make a statement, as well as a change in my life, and enter the race for the Council.

I was also tired of the widespread characterization of Generation X as politically uninterested and uncaring. I was 28 years old and I knew exactly the opposite to be

My inspiration, in part, came from my memories of the young candidates of the 1970s who helped spark Portland's remarkable changes since.

For the May 1996 primary election, we ran a very grassroots campaign, with over 700 volunteers. We used door-hangers, lawn signs, and an ancient van—dubbed the "Sten-Mobile" that played music and flashed lights. It made up in visibility for what we lacked in funds, and it usually made people smile. The campaign was always positive, and I believe it was successful, even though I finished in third

place. Ironically, third place turned out to be the most opportune place to be. While the top two finishers were caught in a tough run-off, I was able to win Blumenauer's seat in a special election. Even though running again was just as much work as the first time, this time I began as the favorite and found myself well-liked by my previous opponents' supporters.

I have very much enjoyed the first year in office. I have always been committed to local issues and have found that local government is the ideal level at which to work. We need good people at all levels of

public office. Part of why I ran was to convince more people that they too can make a difference at any level they choose.

My days in Gretchen's office showed me that local government has all the excitement and complexity of our political system at its best, as well as a close connection to real people and real problems. When we helped build housing, people we knew became tenants. With clear vision and priorities, Gretchen's office could make things happen. Now I hope that my office will do the same thing.



Sten (third from the left) and a few of his supporters.

true. My friends cared deeply, and they had talent that could help the city, but they weren't being asked to take part. Week after week in Gretchen's office, I met with talented young people who couldn't find a place to work within the system.

I thought I could win a campaign and believed that how I conducted it was as important as winning. Voters would respond to a high-energy, grassroots campaign focusing on positive messages. I was determined to show that people in Portland still care about their city and how it works.

Photo courtesy of Erik Sten