

BULLETIN

An activist is born

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by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



ikki Maier likens her entry into HSA involvement to catching the bridal bouquet at a wedding. Last May, she had just started her job as Educator/Speakers Bureau Coordinator at the Living Positive Resource Centre, an AIDS service organization in Kelowna. She was sitting in the office with another coworker when someone came by with mail from HSA.

Nikki Maier Educator / Speakers Bureau Coordinator Chief Steward Living Positive Resource Centre
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-She threw the mail package into the office and I was the one who caught it. And so I took on dealing with it," says Maier. Which led, naturally it seems, to becoming Chief Steward less than a month later.

Maier was well prepared for such a commitment. She brings to HSA an impressive pedigree as a political activist, having used her skills in writing, editing, educating and organizing in service of First Nations issues, the anti-poverty movement, and, currently, the fight against AIDS.

Maier says her background helps her see HSA as part of a broad-based, historical movement for social justice. Workers rights, first nations rights, patients rights ... all are roads to the same destination: human rights.

Maier hasnt always had this awareness. Her political awakening came in her early 20s, when she was studying English in Kelowna.

-I was a political virgin. Then some friends of mine started a Native youth magazine. I thought it would be about how to do your hair, put on lipstick, or it would have an advice column on dating ... that kind of thing," Maier said. She took a job with the magazine because she wanted to develop her writing and editing skills. To her surprise it turned out to be very different ... the magazine dealt with social and political issues in a serious, often radical way.

-It opened my eyes to injustice and the lack of action and awareness around Native issues," says Maier. This ignited a latent passion for social justice, and Maier began to act as a political person ... writing letters to newspapers, joining Native rights organizations, and getting involved in election campaigns.

Maiers next job was editor for *The Long Haul*, an anti-poverty magazine published by the Vancouver group

End Legislated Poverty.

-I got a lot of education doing that job. As you can notice if you look at the name of the organization, we looked at poverty as being rooted in legislation and government policies. We looked at the structure of capitalism, for instance," she said. And while she was gaining an understanding of global structures, she was also finding insight on a very personal level.

-A lot of what I was learning led me to a better understanding of my own family. I grew up with a single parent and it was hard for us. Sometimes we were on social assistance, sometimes not. I was able to see what played into those factors •how poverty is rooted in capitalism and patriarchy," Maier said. However, Maier has no interest in claiming the victim role.

-Im happy Ive had that experience [of economic hardship] and that I wasnt as sheltered as some people. It created a need to fight for the underdog," she says.

After two years at *The Long Haul*, Maier went back to Kelowna to finish her degree. Right after graduation, she saw the Living Positive job advertised in the local paper. It seemed ideal for her. She applied, and got it. So far, it has lived up to her expectations. She fills her workdays organizing and presenting workshops at schools, treatment centers, colleges, and other venues, teaching people to prevent themselves from getting infected with HIV and Hepatitis C.

-There is an epidemic, and its important to make sure people are aware. What I heard at [the April 2005] convention was that HSA members take their jobs very seriously. Were called the union of caring professionals. And thats so true. I care a lot about what I do," she says.

Appreciating solidarity

One of the things Maier has most enjoyed since getting involved with HSA has been opportunities such as the convention, training workshops, and events that bring her in contact with the larger labour movement. Such experiences give her -a sense of solidarity, connections with other union members, contacts with people that are going to remain in place for a long time," she says.

In January, Maier attended The Canadian Labour Congress Winter School at Harrison Hot Springs.


-It was an amazing opportunity to meet other activists from around the province and to look at how strong the labour movement is, how many people are passionate about making sure it remains strong. I hope that labour can continue to be a big movement for social justice," she says.

Maier is not one to hope passively. She brings her unique personal and professional background, her own ability to see the wider picture, as assets to her union work.

-I went to the BC Federation of Labour office once when I was working at End Legislated Poverty. They have pictures of workers on the walls. I saw hardly any brown faces or people who could easily be recognized as Native. While I dont believe there is a single Native perspective, I would hope to bring awareness of some of those issues to HSA.

-For instance, there is a strong history of native people in the labour movement, but its not often recognized," she says.

Also, her awareness of economic injustice, honed at ELP, is still with her.

-At the CLC Winter School Jenny Kwan spoke. I sked a question around cuts to welfare. I hope to be brave enough to keep bringing up issues and asking questions that need to be asked," she said. -The job of a union is not just looking at our own contracts, but also at the rights of all individuals. When we look at the role labour has played in entrenching rights we take for granted today, we can remember that the fight is for social justice in the larger context of what might be." 

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