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Longtime Maine gay-rights leader moving on

After the same-sex marriage victory last fall, Betsy Smith says it's time for others to fight for social equality.

By Edward D. Murphy emurphy@mainetoday.com Staff Writer

PORTLAND — Betsy Smith doesn't believe that the fight for equal rights for gays, lesbians and transgender individuals is over, but it has entered a new phase and that means it may be time for someone else to lead the battle.

Smith, who has been executive director of EqualityMaine since 2002, announced Thursday she will step down as head of the organization where she has volunteered and worked since 1992. Smith will leave at the end of September as part of a transition that has been under way for several months.

"Betsy was on the forefront of gay and lesbian rights in Maine for decades," said David Farmer, who worked with her on the same-sex marriage referendum as the spokesman for Mainers United for Marriage. "She was key to every breakthrough in the state."

Smith said her reasons for leaving are largely personal: She and her partner are looking for greater balance in their work and family life. And although she hasn't decided what she will do next, Smith said it's likely to be something "in the progressive community."

On a professional level, she said her departure reflects her feeling that much of the legislative and political work for equal rights has been done -- capped by last November's passage of same-sex marriage in the state -- and the effort will now shift to focus on achieving greater social equality.

"The stars basically are aligned around the timing of my departure," she said, noting that when she took the job, the goal was securing legal equality for the LGBT community.

"With marriage equality, we've done that," she



Betsy Smith click image to enlarge Gordon Chibroski / Staff Photographer

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Betsy Smith's career with EqualityMaine

1984: EqualityMaine founded after assault on and drowning of a gay man from Bangor.

1992: Smith moves to Maine and volunteers in campaign to defeat repeal of Portland's gay and lesbian anti-discrimination ordinance. The repeal failed.

1993: EqualityMaine helps draft and supports legislation to extend Maine Civil Rights Act cover lesbians and gays under hate crimes laws.

1996: Smith elected president of

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said, adding that full equality will require steps like getting insurers to recognize the medical needs of transgender individuals, and providing more help to both young and elderly LGBT people and those who live in rural areas.

"We need to make equality real for LGBT Mainers on a day-to-day basis," she said. "We're shifting from legal equality to equality in our day-to-day lives."

Most of Smith's work for more than a decade has been conducted in political strategy meetings and lobbying at the State House for bills to protect her constituency from hate crimes and discrimination and to expand their rights.

Same-sex marriage was, essentially, the final summit to climb, but one she wasn't sure she would ever see reached.

"Even 10 years ago, we couldn't have imagined that we would have won marriage (equality) in 2012," she said Thursday.

Smith said she never dreamed that she would lead that effort when she showed up at a meeting of the Maine Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance in 1992 (the name was changed to EqualityMaine in 2004).

She was hoping to help defend Portland's ordinance protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination after opponents of it mounted a people's veto effort and put a repeal measure on the ballot.

At the time, she was a teacher and recent transplant to Maine.

"It's one of those things where you show up at a meeting and then a second and a third and pretty soon, you're president of the organization," she said.

That happened in 1996 for Smith, and she served as president of the board until 1999, when she moved to Boston while her partner attended law school there.

She moved back to Maine just as the organization was transitioning from a part-time executive director to a full-time one, and she got the job.

That led to a series of legislative advances to extend equal rights. Smith said those successes made it a little easier to take the major setback -- repeal of a same-sex marriage law at the polls after the Legislature had approved it in 1999 -- a little more in stride, although it was still disappointing.

"That was part of the two steps forward, one step back" nature of the fight for equal rights, she said.

EqualityMaine.

1999: EqualityMaine helps draft and supports legislation that extends hospital visitation rights to same-sex couples.

2001: EqualityMaine backs legislation requiring insurers to provide domestic partnership coverage to employers requesting it.

2002: Smith becomes first full-time executive director of EqualityMaine.



2004: EqualityMaine backs legislation that created statewide domestic partnership law (pictured above is Smith at a 2004 State House news conference for the legislation).

2005: Group backs effort to include sexual orientation and gender identity in state human rights law. Works with Maine Won't Discrimination to prevent repeal in people's veto referendum.

2007: Backs amendment to Family Medical Leave Act to include domestic partners.

2009: Led effort to get Legislature to legalize same-sex marriage. The law was approved, then overturned by people's veto.

2011: Led effort to defeat bill that would have restricted access to public bathrooms and dressing rooms by transgender individuals and supported state-wide anti-bullying law.

2012: EqualityMaine and Maine Freedom to Marry coalition put same-sex marriage initiative on ballot. Measure is approved, making Maine one of first states to have voter-approved same-sex marriage law.

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And there were a lot of steps forward, she said.

In addition to the same-sex marriage referendum last fall, she said other major victories were getting domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples in 2003 and defeating the effort to repeal the addition of sexual orientation and gender identity to Maine's Human Rights Law two years later.

Still, Nov. 6, 2012 was a high point that can't be equaled, Smith said.

"When I was standing on the stage on election night, looking out over 1,000 people in the ballroom and all their hands were raised and people were screaming and hugging," she said, "I took a mental picture because I figured I would probably never be in this place again."

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