



A Radical in the Suburbs

When Carol Russell won a seat on the city council of the small northern California city of Cloverdale last November, the big news wasn't that she's an out lesbian. It was that she wanted to help control the rapid growth of the small town and honor the city's history.

Her first move as a member of the council was to vote against a housing development that she thought wouldn't fit in the community. "I'm not antidevelopment at all, but I believe in balance and quality," she explained. "I try to explain to people here, if you go to a large city, there's a very big difference between high density on Park Avenue and high density in the South Bronx. It's the quality of the building and the design and its appropriateness to its surrounding, as well as the little things like the greenery that exists."

But the fact that 63-year-old Russell is free to concern herself with planning and density levels — and *not* with defending her sexuality — says something, both about the growing acceptance of queer women in areas from which they had for generations fled and about Russell's charisma, optimism and leadership.

"[I] had been out and active in the community for four years, when I ran for city council," said Russell, who speaks quickly and with a lilting tone that drives home her point. "My partner and I and a friend were co-founders of the North Bay Pride Music Festival. It's not like our faces haven't been all around the city for these things. But nothing happened. That's the great story. I was able to run without any personal fear."

A natural optimist and problem solver, Russell is the daughter of a Russian Jew who immigrated to avoid the Nazis. She's also a woman who has always been out of the closet, even before Stonewall, and who went from welfare as a teenager to the founder of a multimillion-dollar employment firm that's been studied by a Harvard professor and featured in *Inc.* magazine. In other words, she isn't one to let a small town or niggling fears stop her from pursuing her dreams.

"If I think back to when I met Carol, my first impression of her — and I still carry this today — is that she's probably the smartest woman I ever met, the most energetic and has the best sense of humor in the world," says Russell's partner of 37 years, Roz Katz. "Her sense of humor is one of the reasons she's been so successful in her life."

Russell, on the other hand, had no doubt that her life would turn out well. She knew all she had to do was work hard and have faith in herself and others; it's a lesson she thinks the queer community could stand to learn a little better, as well.

"I'm an optimist but not a cockeyed optimist. Things only work out if you work at them," she said. "I don't think we have enough pride in what we have accomplished as a community. We tend to look at what we haven't accomplished, but we've battled everything from bigotry to disease. We deserve to give ourselves some credit." — *HB*