



Noble, Elaine (b. 1944)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A dedicated lesbian activist during the early part of the gay liberation movement, Elaine Noble chose electoral politics as her avenue for change and made history as the first openly gay candidate ever elected to a state-level office. Coming out during her 1974 campaign for a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives took courage, and so did trying to fulfill the expectations of a long under-represented gay community.

Though she was often overwhelmed, both by the homophobia she faced and by criticism from her own community, Noble used her position to work for gay civil rights and other progressive causes.

Born on January 22, 1944 in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, Noble received her higher education in Massachusetts. She earned her B.F.A. degree at Boston University in 1966 before going on to study speech and education at Emerson College and Harvard University. Between 1966 and 1974, she held several jobs as a speech instructor and worked for a time as an advertising manager for Sweetheart Plastics.

At the same time, she was an out lesbian, working to organize in her own community, from planning Boston's earliest pride marches to protesting at the city's prestigious Locke-Ober restaurant to end its prohibition against women eating in the bar.

In 1974, Noble ran for a seat in the state House of Representatives, for the Fenway and Back Bay neighborhood district of Boston. She won with 59 percent of the vote, and was catapulted into history as the first openly gay person elected to office at the state level. (During the early 1970s, Nancy Wechsler had come out as a lesbian while serving on the Ann Arbor, Michigan city council; and in 1974, Kathy Kozachenko, an out lesbian, was elected to fill Wechsler's seat on council.) Noble's election, and her successful re-election bid in 1976, were important hallmarks for the gay community, paving the way for the hundreds of openly gay candidates who appear on ballots throughout the United States each year.

Her public position placed Noble in the line of fire for both threats from bigots and complaints from her gay constituency. Her house was vandalized and she was threatened with a gun because of her support for legislation forcing the integration of Boston schools. At the same time, she felt burdened and frustrated by the demands of gay men and lesbians who seemed to expect that she speak for all of them. In an interview with Sasha Gregory-Lewis, in Mark Thompson's *Long Road to Freedom* (1994), she said, "The gay community expected me to be on call 24 hours a day. It was like they felt they owned me."

After her two terms in the statehouse, Noble took a job in the office of Boston mayor Kevin White, where she became embroiled in an FBI sting operation concerning kickbacks paid to the mayor's office. Noble testified before the grand jury for nineteen hours, but no charges were filed against her.

In 1980, she re-entered politics by running for the U.S. Senate, but lost in the primary to Democrat Paul Tsongas. She then left politics, but continued to serve the community by starting Noble Associates, a health-care consulting business. This venture led to the formation, in 1986, of the Pride Institute, which

Noble started with Ellen Ratner in Minneapolis. The Pride Institute was a gay and lesbian alcohol and drug treatment center.

The Pride Institute was successful, and Noble hoped to start a similar program in the Boston area. However, she ran into opposition from local government organizations, prompting her in 1991 and 1993 to run for Cambridge city council, losing both times.

In 1994, she took a job as head administrator at Middlesex County Hospital near Boston, resigning six months later.

In the 1970s, Noble was involved in a highly publicized affair with writer Rita Mae Brown, but she has since zealously guarded her privacy.

Noble has now largely retired from public life and lives in Florida.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.