



Parker, Annise (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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An official portrait of Houston, Texas Mayor Annise Parker.

In 2009, after a dozen years in elective office in Houston, Texas, Annise Parker won election to the mayoralty of the fourth-largest city in the United States, becoming the first open lesbian to lead a major American city.

Since then, she has been re-elected twice and has earned the respect of even conservative Republicans for her competence and dedication.

A native of Houston, born May 17, 1956, Parker was raised in the Spring Branch community of Houston. Her mother was a bookkeeper and her father worked for the Red Cross. His job took the family to the U. S. Army Base in Mannheim, Germany for a two-year stay when Annise was 15.

After graduating from high school in South Carolina in 1974, she returned to Houston to attend Rice University on a National Merit Scholarship, and the city has been her home ever since. Following her graduation from college with a degree in anthropology and sociology in 1978, she began a career doing economic modeling for energy companies. She worked for 18 years for Mosbacher Energy.

Out since her high school days, Parker also became involved in the quest for glbtq rights. She was instrumental in establishing a glbtq student organization at Rice and subsequently joined gay and lesbian groups in the community. She was among the participants in the city's first Pride parade in 1979.

Parker became president of Houston's Gay Political Caucus in 1986, a year after the citizens had decisively rejected an initiative to prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

"It was a scary, very difficult time," Parker stated to Mike Snyder of the *Houston Chronicle*. "The two most visible lesbian activists in Houston were myself and Sue Lovell (now a City Council member). We had regular death threats, our tires slashed, vandalism."

Parker became the co-owner of a gay and feminist bookstore, Inklings, in 1988. Two years later, tax-preparer Kathy Hubbard made a pitch for the company's business. The bookstore was using another tax service, but Parker engaged Hubbard to do her own taxes.

The two women quickly developed a friendship that blossomed into romance and, ultimately, a lifetime commitment.

In 1993 the couple expanded their family by taking in Jovon Tyler, a sixteen-year-old boy who was homeless because his previous caretakers, his grandparents, had cast him out when he revealed that he was gay.

The couple did not formally adopt Tyler, but they are the women that he acknowledges as his mothers. They encouraged him to continue his education, and they proudly attended his graduation from mortuary school.

The family grew again when Parker and Hubbard adopted sisters Daniela and Marquitta—then twelve and seven years of age, respectively—in 2003.

Because of her activism for glbtq rights Parker was named to the Houston Police Advisory Committee. In response to anti-gay crimes of violence, the police, in 1991, undertook "Operation Vice Versa," an initiative that had undercover officers posing as gay male couples to test the extent of the problem, which the police apparently did not originally perceive as particularly significant.

As it turned out, there were half a dozen attacks on Operation Vice Versa decoys in the first two weeks of the project, with fourteen people arrested as a result.

"The [Houston police] department was flabbergasted," vice-president Robert Bridges of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Caucus told Jacob Smith Yang of the *Gay Community News*. "My understanding is they were going to run the program for 30 days, hoping to document just one case. I don't know if they think we were crying wolf or just a bunch of whiners or what."

Regarding the police department's expectations, Parker stated to Smith Yang, "I believe they thought not much would happen, and now they will have to try to decide what to do now that they see the problem's magnitude."

Parker went on to note that an officer who was maced while holding hands with a male colleague as part of the sting operation was subjected to taunts "in the station locker room [that] would have been grounds for an arrest on his . . . beat."

While recognizing the institutionalized homophobia often present in police departments, Parker called Operation Vice Versa "a great tool for officer sensitivity training" and expressed the hope that the Houston police department would become more inclusive "with some openly gay and lesbian officers on the force."

Parker made her first foray into elective politics in 1991, running unsuccessfully against an incumbent district representative on the Houston City Council.

She ran again in 1997, winning an at-large seat and becoming the first openly glbtq person elected to office in the city.

As a member of the City Council she helped establish a "Rainy Day Fund," promoted a civic art program, worked for more stringent control of inner-city development, and supported a "pooper-scooper" law for cleaner city streets. She also urged Houston's first African-American mayor, Lee Brown, to issue an executive order prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in city employment.

The mayor's attempt to provide domestic partner benefits to city employees was stymied by a citizens' initiative banning such benefits.

After two more terms on the Council, being barred by term-limit laws from seeking re-election, she set her sights on the office of City Controller and was thrice elected.

As Controller, Parker sought to increase the efficacy of her office. In a 2004 interview with Bruce Nichols of the *Dallas Morning News* she expressed concern about the amount of power residing in the mayor's office and also expressed support for an initiative to give greater authority to the City Council, particularly with respect to the retention or replacement of department heads.

Also in 2004, Houstonians approved a charter amendment endorsed by Parker allowing the Controller to conduct audits of the city's government.

In 2009, when incumbent Houston Mayor Bill White could not stand for re-election due to term limits on that office, Parker entered the race to succeed him. In the primary, she finished first in a crowded field but did not win a majority, and the election went to a run-off.

Parker's sexual orientation was largely a non-issue in the primary campaign, but once she made the run-off, she became the object of various homophobic comments or attacks.

A number of African-American clergy urged Houstonians to vote against Parker because of her unspecified "gay agenda."

Anti-glbtc activist Dave Wilson sent out a mass mailing of fliers with a photograph of Parker and Hubbard captioned "Is this the image Houston wants to portray?"

Wilson—rather incredibly—declared to Mike Tolson of the *Houston Chronicle* that his mailing, however individually directed, "was not intended to be a personal attack on Parker," but rather a reflection of his belief that "homosexual behavior, to any society that's embraced it, has led to the extinction of that society."

A second anti-glbtc activist, Steven Hotze, fanned the flames of hatred with another mailing condemning Parker for her activism for equality. Further controversy erupted when it became known that two members of the finance committee of Parker's opponent in the run-off, Gene Locke, had made hefty contributions to Hotze's political action committee.

Locke tried to put himself above the fray but was not able to do so since, as Bradley Olson of the *Houston Chronicle* reported in November 2009, Locke had "met with and sought the endorsement of Dr. Steven Hotze, a longtime kingmaker in conservative politics and author of the *Straight Slate* in 1985, a coterie of eight City Council candidates he recruited who ran on an anti-gay platform."

In an interview on the National Public Radio program "All Things Considered" after her victory, Parker stated that "there was an element of shock when those mail pieces first came out. And I think it offended people who scratched their heads and said, 'Well, we already knew that [i.e., that she is a lesbian] about her.'"

She also declared, "I was very clear to my supporters and the public at large, when I was running, that being gay is part of who I am. It's not all, and it is not anything that I want to lead with as mayor of Houston," further noting that the city faces "numerous critical issues" on a wide variety of fronts.

Despite being outspent by Locke in the election, Parker won the run-off by a margin of 53 to 47 percent.

The political action committee of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund offered financial support to Parker's candidacy, and local glbtq groups and individuals gave of their time and effort as campaign volunteers, but, as political analyst Kyle Johnston observed to Joe Holley of the *Houston Chronicle*, her success was ultimately due to establishing a connection with the community and responding to their multifarious concerns over the course of her career. "She started this thing with a base of voters, and she ended it with a base of voters, built over a dozen years."

Although Parker is certainly not a single-issue politician, her visibility as an openly lesbian elected official drew world-wide attention after her victory in the run-off.

"It's unprecedented for an election for the mayor of Houston to make the cover of the *Times of India*," Parker noted to David Taffet of the *Dallas Voice*. "It was difficult to slog through. It was a distraction at the beginning."

Nevertheless, the publicity provided opportunities for Parker to serve her city. While on a trade mission to China in 2010, Parker, who had been named in *Time* magazine's latest list of the "100 most powerful people in the world," was granted a meeting with a Chinese official also included on the roster.

She surmised that he "probably met with her because both were on the list and because of the curiosity factor" about a woman—particularly a lesbian—in a position of political power.

Parker has stated to her constituents, "My number one priority as your mayor is fiscal responsibility." She noted that when she took office the difference between the city's expected expenses and available revenue was some 205 million dollars. Through a variety of measures, including finding ways to reduce expenses and consolidate operations and by selling some surplus land, she has been able to reduce the gap, a difficult task in a severely strained economy.

Although Parker is insistent on her commitment to work for the good of all Houstonians, she is also mindful of the importance of promoting equality for glbtq people and encouraging women to take an active role in politics.

"I really do believe that the fact that I'm wanting to be a role model for the LGBT community, wanting to represent women in public office . . . makes me a better office-holder," she stated to Laura Kiritsy of *Ms.* magazine, adding that "girls and women need to follow their passions. Getting to serve my city and local government is an absolute passion for me. . . . I figured out what I needed to do in order to win the race to get there. I hope that there are girls and women out there who choose to do the same."

Although Parker stands for all Houstonians, she has shown her support for the glbtq community by amending the city's non-discrimination policy regarding hiring, promotion, and contracting to include transgender persons. In addition, in April 2010 she signed an order allowing transgender people to use the restrooms in public buildings for the gender with which they identify.

Kris Banks, the president of the Houston Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Political Caucus called Parker's actions "essential" because "a non-discrimination provision that protects sexual orientation but doesn't protect gender identity is toothless," adding that "it's quite a thing, having a mayor that really understands these issues."

Parker further affirmed her support for the transgender community by nominating Phyllis Randolph Frye as the first transgender municipal judge in Houston in November 2010. The City Council unanimously approved the appointment of Frye to the bench.

In 2011, Parker ran for re-election. She faced five challengers and received 51 percent of the vote in the primary, thus she was able to avoid a run-off.

In 2013, Parker again faced the voters. This time she garnered 57 percent of the vote, 30 percent more than her closest opponent in the nine-person field.

Since Houston has a law limiting mayors to three two-year terms Parker cannot run again when her term expires in 2015.

In comments to Molly Hennessy-Fiske of the *Los Angeles Times*, political science Professor Mark Jones of Rice University commented that despite her gay activism Parker has been able to forge a working relationship with both liberals and conservatives in the city. He said, "The mayor has an image as a

technocrat, a policy wonk, not an in-your-face left-wing activist. She's not someone who really alienates conservatives. . . . She's first and foremost a mayor who focuses on policy. Her life is one that people in Houston can really identify with. . . . Unless they can't get past her sexual orientation, there are a substantial number of Republicans who are happy with her, or at least won't go out and vote against her."

Under Parker's leadership, Houston came through the "great recession" in relatively better financial shape than many other large American cities. Parker made job growth a priority. Her initiatives included Rebuild Houston, an infrastructure project that created many new jobs that will be retained.

In addition, she established a city department to respond to the needs of neighborhoods and an office to promote business opportunities for small companies owned by women or members of minority communities. *Fast Company*, a business magazine, chose Houston as City of the Year in both 2010 and 2011.

President Obama named Parker to his Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience in November 2013. She is also a member of the Advisory Council of the United States Secretary of Homeland Security. In addition, she serves on the board of the Texas Environmental Research Consortium.

In November 2013 Parker announced that Houston will extend life and health insurance benefits to the spouses of all legally married city employees, including those who have wed a same-sex partner in a jurisdiction where such marriages are legal. Parker argues that the United States Supreme Court decision in June 2013 in *United States v. Windsor*, which found Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional, supersedes a similar state law in Texas.

With respect to a 2001 amendment to the Houston city charter that was passed to deny benefits to same-sex partners of city employees but did so by limiting spousal benefits to legally married spouses, she commented to Mike Morris of the *Houston Chronicle*, "The amendment specifically permits benefits to be provided to legal spouses of employees. I can only assume that it was contemplated that there would never be a time when same-sex couples were in legally sanctioned relationships."

On December 17, 2013, the chairman of the Harris County Republican Party filed a lawsuit challenging the benefits. A Republican state judge issued a temporary restraining order against the implementation of the non-discriminatory policy until a hearing scheduled for January 6, 2014. City Attorneys and Lambda Legal managed to get the case moved to federal court, where a judge quickly dissolved the state judge's restraining order and the benefits went into effect even as the broader issue remains before the courts.

Although Parker had said that she and Hubbard would not get married until same-sex marriage was legal in Texas, the Supreme Court ruling striking down the Defense of Marriage Act in June 2013 seems to have changed her mind.

Parker and Hubbard wed in a ceremony at a private home in Palm Springs, California on January 16, 2014 on the couple's 23rd anniversary.

The ceremony was held at sunset and was attended by a small group of family and friends of the couple, including Parker's mother and Hubbard's sister and the couple's adopted son.

In a press release issued following the wedding, Parker said, "We have had to wait a very long time to formalize our commitment to each other. Kathy has been by my side for more than two decades, helping to raise a family, nurture my political career and all of the other ups and down and life events that come with a committed relationship."

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