

PORTLAND'S RON SCHMIDT

Unfinished business

As cancer saps the life from the keen power player, he rages against Measure 9

By FOSTER CHURCH
of The Oregonian staff

He's dying, this 56-year-old man who still talks with the verve and optimism of a youthful prodigy. For a generation of powerbrokers, Ron Schmidt was the up-and-comer, bursting with youthful savvy and quickness. Later, he became a power in his own right, shrewd, prosperous and well-connected.

Now, cruising toward death from his home on Lake Oswego, he reflects on the state he loves, its powerful mystique and on the darkness he fears may envelop it.

He was like a son to Tom McCall and stood at the charismatic governor's elbow during some of the state's defining moments.

Glenn Jackson, the state's consummate powerbroker, bankrolled Schmidt's first public-relations office in Portland.

Gerry Frank, the multimillionaire former aide to Sen. Mark Hatfield, helped get Schmidt one of his first jobs in Oregon.

For nearly 30 years, as aide to McCall and later as owner of the state's biggest and most influential public-relations firm, Schmidt stood at the center of public policy in business, government and the arts.

Tom McCall raged against his dying light to the end. Three months before his death of cancer in 1983, McCall, haggard and exhausted, appeared before a group of businesspeople and environmentalists and begged Oregonians not to vote for a ballot measure that would gut the state's pioneer land-use planning law.

Ron Schmidt rages now, too.

On the deck of his lakeside home on a warm late-summer afternoon, with his wife, Ede, at his side, Schmidt talks about his life, about Oregon and about Measure 9. Before him, gray-green water meets the green of fir trees, and beyond them the pale-blue late-summer sky — a particularly Oregon palette.

Schmidt talks in quick soundbites, plugging the hole in his throat with a hornplayer's nonchalance. Cancer has taken his voice but not his self-confidence or determination to be heard.

Recently, severely emaciated and breathing through a tracheal pipe, he stood before 150 community leaders and urged them to give money to defeat Ballot Measure 9.

The measure would alter the Oregon Constitution to declare homosexuality abnormal, ban certain human rights guarantees for gay men and lesbians and require governments to discourage homosexuality.

For Schmidt, Ballot Measure 9 abridges essential human rights. Respect for rights of the individuality is part of his vision of the spirit of Oregon. It's the spirit of Oregon that fills his mind and heart now.

For Schmidt, Oregon has always been a state of mind — a light of caring and individuality, progressive daring and physical beauty.

His adoptive parents were born in Grants Pass. He grew up in Turlock in Central California but lit out for Oregon whenever he could.

"I have had a love affair with Oregon all my life. It goes back to the seventh grade. I was living in Turlock. A buddy of mine decided it was time to run away



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from home. Where did we run to? Oregon."

As a student in public relations at San Jose State College, he took an internship at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He met Gerry Frank and Glenn Jackson. He returned to California, but came back in 1963 when Frank helped him get a job as marketing director for Lloyd Center.

Had he stayed in California, he might be viewing San Francisco Bay now. He has no regrets.

"I came from a middle-class family in a rural California community. We had no political connections, and what I had that was unique was a degree in public relations. Unique if I came to Oregon, not

unique if I stayed in the Bay Area. I felt that the opportunity for me was in Oregon. I loved this state."

The affection has been returned. Schmidt's associations have given him a range of acquaintances and influence only a handful of Oregonians can claim. He sits on the Oregon Arts Commission and was its chairman for two years. But he also served on the executive board of Associated Oregon Industries, the state's biggest business lobbying group. If not for his illness, he would have become its president in 1994.

With his wife, Ede, and dog, Governor, Ron Schmidt speaks about his lifelong love affair with Oregon.

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Between his work in government and public relations, Ron Schmidt has had an insider's view of public policy decisions shaping Oregon and the Oregon ethos. Here are, first, legislative highlights of the McCall years and then agenda-making campaigns in which he had a hand:



Willamette Greenway: 1967

The bill, strongly pushed by the McCall administration, set aside money to preserve natural beauty along the river and helped cities and counties acquire rights to new riverside park properties.

Bottle bill: 1971

Oregon's Beverage Container Act, a measure that defined Oregon nationally as a leader in environmental consciousness,

passed during the McCall administration. The first of its kind in the nation, the bill required a refundable deposit for pop and beer bottles that reduced litter and encouraged recycling.



Senate Bill 100: 1973

Schmidt, as a member of the McCall administration, helped push through the bill that created a Land Conservation and Development Commission, giving it broad authority to define goals and develop guidelines governing areas and activities of statewide concern.

Property tax limitations defeated: 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986

Schmidt's belief in support for government services was turned into leadership in these campaigns to defeat property tax limitations.



Oregon Lottery: 1985

Schmidt's public relations firm helped launch this state's lottery, which generates millions of dollars in revenue for Oregon economic development. After a slow first year, sales have risen steadily; last year, the Legislature allocated \$44 million in lottery profits.

State support for the arts: 1986

Schmidt was appointed to the Oregon Arts Commission in 1986. He served as chairman in 1987 and 1988.

Oregon Convention Center: 1986

Schmidt's firm helped convince voters that a property tax increase was worth a new convention center. The center, his campaign claimed, would generate 4,300 jobs and attract millions of dollars in out-of-town business.

Defeat of smoking ban: 1988

Using the argument that a ban on smoking was government intrusion, Schmidt led a charge to convince 61 percent of voters to shoot down the controversial ballot measure.

Defeat of packaging ban: 1990

Schmidt downed the ballot measure by casting it as anti-business, banning packaging rather than planning for recycling.

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Ron Schmidt

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Schmidt: Deep love for Oregon feeds fervor to fight for progressive political change

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He has become one of the state's most powerful progressive voices, bridging chasms between Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, between arts and commerce.

He started with one considerable asset: He was a keen young man, smart, observant, well-spoken and personable.

He met Tom McCall. When McCall was elected governor in 1966, Schmidt joined the administration. He worked with him for the next eight years, as administrative assistant, press aide, and finally as McCall's executive assistant.

McCall, sidekicks say, needed a damage control expert, someone who could backstop the boss, keep him out of trouble, focus the beaming McCall charisma, give him some finesse. Schmidt became one of the most important members of the McCall administration.

"We knew we were working for someone who cared deeply about Oregon. That was the priority. It wasn't the individual and his political agenda that was the priority. It was Oregon. That was very important. He said, 'I love Oregon more than I love life.' That sums it up."

Cancer limits Schmidt's diet to soups and pasta. And even though he weakens day by day, the wit and humor remain. At 125 pounds, with a hole in his throat, he remains mentally sharp and oddly youthful.

"There is a feeling here in Oregon that is different from any other place," he says. "There is a feeling of caring, one of innovation, willing to try things. There is an honesty in this state, and I firmly believe there is an honesty in our political system. You get this feeling when you talk to Oregonians, whether they are central or southern or metropolitan."

The McCall administration "literally hitched on to that pride," Schmidt says, and that led to a record of progressive legislation unmatched in Oregon, and perhaps the nation.

The accomplishments defined Oregon in the national mind, gave a legal framework to the "mystique" that had always been Oregon — the bottle bill, the bill guaranteeing public access to Oregon beaches, the



For many years election nights, such as this one in 1990, have found Ron Schmidt awaiting the word of the voters.

The Oregonian/1990

Willamette River Greenway, a plan for enhancing the river, and statewide land-use planning.

He remembers the struggle of McCall's first term.

"These were sweeping changes we had proposed. This was not a wimpy program. We were not that successful during those years. But in our last four, we were really hitting our stride."

The momentum peaked with comprehensive land-use planning, approved in 1973 as Senate Bill 100. Schmidt still wonders at the raw nerve of an administration that could tear down the walls of special interests, risk regional divisions and pass a law that nearly two decades later remains a model for the nation.

With these accomplishments, the Oregon mystique became more than a state of mind. A vision — cultivated by McCall, Schmidt and others who saw something worth preserving — was being transmuted into reality.

Schmidt went on to found the state's most influential public-relations firm, Pihas Schmidt & Westerdahl, in 1975. As the state's most accomplished spin doctor, he attracted major corporations, including Precision Castparts and Portland General Electric. But he still had his hand in public policy-making: Major political candidates including Sen. Mark Hatfield solicited

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Ron Schmidt

ed Schmidt's advice. Of the 20 ballot measure campaigns his firm took on, it won all but two.

Schmidt didn't always stand on the side of the angels, at least according to those in environmentalist circles. However, he defends his fight against a ban on smoking in public places and a recycling measure on the basis that they were bad public policy — the same argument that fuels his opposition to tax limitation measures that fail to create alternate sources of revenue.

His firm successfully fought tax limit measures in 1980, 1982, 1984 and 1986. The string ran out in 1990 when voters approved Ballot Measure 5.

Schmidt also came up a loser in

1986 when he signed on to the campaign to pass a sales tax.

"Measure Five had to happen," he says now. "And as terrible as it is, we have to look to see if there is good to come out of it."

Given his optimism in the face of death, Schmidt's optimism concerning his dreaded nemesis, Ballot Measure 5, seems less surprising.

"Government has got to change, and it will. But in the process it will be painful for those who don't have a voice. Those who are dependent on our services will take cuts that I don't believe anyone who voted for the measure would want."

Animated about this issue, Schmidt is no longer an ill man; he recalls the strategist of old, cocky and knowing, attired in the fashionable clothes he loves, bobbing and weaving in the public arena.

He allows himself to play the oracle, noting the Ross Perot phenomenon and the frustration with government that he believes caused voters blindly to accept the unknown.

"The cynicism about government at all levels we are seeing today is going to pass," he predicts. "In Oregon, I have been an advocate of a sales tax, and I think it is going to pass in 1993. But if it is going to be successful it will require the business community to bring it out, finance it and get it before the people. I see a much bigger role for the

business community — big and small — to have a say in government."

Temporarily losing control of the wind instrument that is his voice, Schmidt rises and moves inside briefly. The needed break brings the gravity of his illness to the center again.

Schmidt has been riding the roller coaster of cancer since 1985, when doctors diagnosed cancer of the esophagus.

Of the approximately 150 different kinds of cancer, esophageal cancer is among the most deadly. He fought back with radiation therapy in 1985, and the tumor vanished.

In 1988, it recurred in the right fourth rib. He tried chemotherapy, and again the tumor vanished.

In 1991, he had trouble swallowing. The cancer was spreading. Radiation shrunk the tumor, but the treatments weakened his larynx and trachea. To allow him to breathe, the tube was placed in his trachea. But to talk, he must block the flow of air past the larynx.

On Sept. 6, Schmidt asked his doctor, Frank McBarron, for the prognosis.

"I was sitting in my doctor's office, and he said, 'We have to close the book.' I said, 'How long do I have to live?' He said, 'Maybe six months. More realistic, it will probably be two months.'"

McBarron does not recall the conversation exactly in those terms. But the image of human life as a book, filled over time with knowledge and passion but now ready to be quietly closed and put away, was a point of awakening for Schmidt.

He realized that he had something left to do.

"I said, 'I have some unfinished business.' And that was Measure 9. That's when this priority was there. It just came out, and I realized that it was important to me."

For Schmidt, the Oregon mys-

tique was a legacy still worth fighting for. In his view, Measure 9 is the shadow cast across his vision of a state in which physical beauty melded with progressive social policy.

"It is the meanest initiative that I have ever seen on an Oregon ballot," he declares. "If Measure 9 passes, we will have lost Oregon as it is today. We will have our constitution amended to say we are discriminating against a class of people. It is almost unbelievable that it can happen in this state."

Both Schmidt and his wife of 18 years — a well-known community activist in her own right — shrug off the potential for rumors that his shrunken physical size is the result not of cancer but of AIDS. What he fears more than gossip is the loss of Oregon as a fiercely independent place and leader in human rights.

"In one day that can all change. If Measure 9 passes, we will get the reputation of being the most bigoted state in America."

When the No on 9 Committee asked Schmidt's agency to submit a proposal to act as paid consultant to the campaign, he declined. But he signed on as a volunteer. He was contacted immediately and asked to appear at the committee's breakfast.

At first he declined. "At 7:30 I don't have any energy."

The organizers called back, asking him to try.

"I thought about it. Decided if I was going to do something, this was where I would do it. So I wrote my remarks down, asked Ede if she would take me there. And I showed up and gave my last hurrah."

Now Schmidt hopes he'll be alive to cast his vote at the Nov. 3 general election.

"I don't want to die, but I am ready. I had to have a last cause. I couldn't come home and wait for the grim reaper. Measure 9 and Ron Schmidt were made for each other. We're both going to go out fighting."

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