

Thalia Zepatos

Will Receive the **Soapstone Bread and Roses Award**
International Women's Day, March 8, 2025



The Soapstone Bread and Roses Award honors a woman whose work has helped to sustain the Oregon writing community. Previously this award has gone to a woman whose work was specifically within and for our literary community—both writers and readers. This year we have broadened its scope to honor a member of Oregon's literary community whose work has impacted millions of lives around the world in profound ways, *as well as* the lives of writers and readers in Oregon. We celebrate writer and activist Thalia Zepatos for her decades of work on reproductive freedom and LGBT equality—crucial work that has enabled our literary community to thrive. She will receive a bouquet of roses and a check for \$2000 at a private gathering with current and former board members on March 8, 2025.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which struck down all the remaining state bans on same-sex marriage. Decades of work fighting for gay and

lesbian rights as well as a phenomenally successful final campaign by Freedom to Marry led to this final victory. Throughout those years, Thalia was a dedicated key player in bringing about change.

It's easy to view social change as an irresistible tide of public opinion when, in fact, it not only takes legions of hard-working volunteers but also a select few who assume leadership roles and work to shape the conversation, creating the context for change. Thalia was such a leader for the campaign that finally achieved marriage equality. Known as "message guru" for the Freedom to Marry campaign, she worked with partners in Oregon and across the US to create the message shift that led to a huge growth in support, paving the way for the Supreme Court decision in 2015.

With regard to marriage for same-sex couples, the discourse had traditionally focused on rights and benefits. Thalia's work transformed the discussion to the universal values of love and commitment. "Love is Love" became a catchphrase easily grasped. In an interview in 2018 with Martin Meeker, the director of the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, Thalia said: "There's a campaign truism, which is whoever defines the campaign will win it...If you get people to say, this is what it is really about...you're setting the terms of the debate. We were looking for that statement that a lot of people could nod their heads to." Love is love continues to be the easiest access most people have to opening their minds and hearts to many millions of people formerly invisible or seen as "other."

An activist from the day she moved to Portland in 1979, Thalia became a statewide organizer for the abortion rights group NARAL and later served on the national staff. By the late eighties, with reproductive rights secure in Oregon, she gravitated to defending the LGBT community against attacks from the right. In 1988, she helped on the campaign to defeat Measure 8, an attempt by the Oregon Citizens Alliance to overturn a gubernatorial order that barred state employees from being fired for their sexual orientation,

Oregon became an early battleground for LGBT rights, facing 35 ballot measures, at every level of government, more than any other state. In 1992, the Oregon Citizens Alliance put Measure 9 on the ballot, which sought to declare homosexuality to be "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse." Oregon Historical Quarterly recorded it as "one of the harshest anti-gay measures put to voters in American history." Homophobic attacks and violent anti-LGBT rhetoric skyrocketed. Hattie Mae Cohens, a lesbian and Brian Mock, a gay man, were killed by fire bombs thrown by racist skinheads into their apartment in Salem in September of that year. The Portland police chief and FBI soon alerted the campaign against car bombs and other attacks. It was an intense and frightening time for everyone involved in the campaign.

After she helped lead the successful effort to defeat Measure 9, Thalia wrote a pair of travel books encouraging women to travel the world. Because she had been a world traveler herself, her books provided stunning stories and crucial advice. *A Journey of One's Own*, published in 1993 by The Eighth Mountain Press, became a best seller; two expanded and updated editions were published over the following decade, making Thalia the go-to expert for journalists on the new topic of women traveling on their own, especially outside traditional tourist destinations. *Adventures in Good Company*, which focused on women's tours and outdoor trips, was published by The Eighth Mountain Press in 1995. In 1996, *Women for a Change: A Grassroots Guide to Activism and Politics*, which she co-wrote with political consultant Elizabeth Kaufman, was published by Facts on File. All three books received extensive national publicity and recognition. She was an active member of the Portland literary community: a long-time member of a writing group led by Andrea Carlisle, a volunteer for Soapstone, a nonprofit that

supports women writers, and a staff member at The Flight of the Mind: Writing Workshops for Women, held between 1984 and 2000 on the McKenzie River.

Although she now had a full-time writing career, Thalia continued as a heterosexual ally, advising behind the scenes in 1994 to help defeat Measure 13, which sought to amend the state constitution to prohibit any political body in the state from enacting laws to protect lesbian, gay and transgender people from discrimination and prohibit public schools from expressing approval of homosexuality.

Thalia was then recruited to help fight against anti-LGBT attacks nationwide and joined the staff at the National LGBTQ Task Force, where she trained thousands of campaign and community activists in multiple states. During the 2004 campaign over Ballot Measure 36, which banned same-sex marriage in Oregon, Thalia lent both personal and professional support. (The ban was finally overturned by a federal judge in 2014.)

Thalia subsequently took a leadership role at Freedom to Marry, helping develop the national strategy to win marriage equality nationwide. While the cases began winning in courts, no state had ever legalized marriage between same-gender couples by popular vote. Thalia's work to coordinate messaging and campaign strategy laid the groundwork for the first four statewide initiative victories for marriage equality in 2012, in Washington, Minnesota, Maine, and Maryland.

Public opinion in support of marriage equality, as measured by the Gallup poll, first crossed the 50% mark in 2011, one year after Thalia implemented the new messaging campaign. Public support rapidly grew to 60% by 2015 and stands at almost 70% today.

Over the past decade she has been an advisor to anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia campaigns in Asia, Eastern Europe and the Americas through Freedom to Marry Global. As a key leader of this movement, Thalia's work has impacted every aspect of our society and many worldwide. With this award we mark the impact of her work on Oregon's writing community—as one of our own—creating new possibilities, visibility, and recognition for writers and readers of all genders and identities.