



Sweet Victory

“It feels like the world has not stopped moving,” says Mark Ferrandino ’99, ’00 (MS), Colorado’s newly elected speaker of the House.

By Karen McCally ’02 (PhD)

MARK FERRANDINO ’99, ’00 (MS) CALLS HIS election to become speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives “overwhelming and humbling.”

His rise to the speakership has made national news. Come January, he’ll become the first openly gay House speaker in a state that 20 years ago legalized discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Just last May, Ferrandino, a Democrat who has represented south-central Denver

▲ **DOUBLE VICTORY:** Ferrandino’s election as Colorado’s first openly gay speaker of the House is a victory for him as well as a milestone for Colorado legislative politics.

since 2007, championed a bill in the House making it legal in the state for same sex couples to form civil unions. Under the leadership of then speaker Frank McNulty, who represents the Republican stronghold of Douglas County in a state with a solid base of religious conservatives, the bill—which had passed the Senate, had the strong backing of Gov. John Hickenlooper, and enough committed Republican votes in the House to pass—never reached the floor for that final vote.

“After what we went through last year people were eager and excited to work on campaigns to change our direction,” says Ferrandino, who framed the failure of the civil unions bill to become law as an issue of subverted democracy as much as an

issue of equal justice for gays and lesbians. The Democrats took over the majority on Election Day, and named Ferrandino, who had been the Democratic leader since November 2011, speaker of the House two days later.

A native of Nyack, N.Y., Ferrandino arrived in Colorado only in 2004. After completing a double major in economics and political science and a master’s degree in public policy analysis, Ferrandino moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked in the White House in the Office of Management and Budget. He began dating Greg Wertsch, a federal law enforcement officer with the Department of Homeland Security. When Wertsch was offered a job in Colorado, Ferrandino went with him.



Ferrandino moved quickly up the state party ranks. In 2005, he became treasurer of the Colorado Democratic Party and in 2006, landed a position at the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing as a senior budget analyst. In 2007, he was named Colorado Young Democrat of the Year and in 2010, when he'd become the ranking Democrat on the Colorado legislature's Joint Budget Committee, the party named him a Rising Star.

Wertsch, still his partner—the two are also the new parents of a baby girl—has been a steady source of support. “He knew when we met that I wanted to run for office. He’s been very supportive—though not always supportive of the pay cut I took when I ran for the legislature,” Ferrandino says dryly.

“I’m a numbers guy,” he says, referring to his passion for budgetary issues, which will be a priority in January.

Not surprisingly, another key issue will be civil unions. He plans to reintroduce the bill on day one of the new session. **R**



HOT IN TENNESSEE: Nashville’s Alias Chamber Ensemble, which includes four Eastman alumni, has won accolades for its innovative repertoire as well as for its service to the community.

Creating a Buzz in Nashville

“The initial idea was that we would play music with our close friends and give back to the community,” says **Zeneba Bowers** ’94E, ’96E (MM), artistic director of Nashville’s Alias Chamber Ensemble.

Eleven concert seasons later, that’s still the idea. But the ensemble’s impact has been more substantial than that modest goal might suggest.

The 12-member ensemble includes four alumni from the Eastman School—violinist Bowers, harpist **Licia Jaskunas** ’91E (MM), and the husband-and-wife team of percussionist **Chris Norton** ’83E, ’86E (MA) and horn player **Leslie Boggs Norton** ’84E.

Their first recording, *Hilos* (Naxos, 2010), was nominated for a Grammy Award, and, coinciding with the release of their second CD, *Boiling Point* (Delos Records), Nashville Mayor Karl Dean declared last September 25 as “Alias Chamber Ensemble Day.”

In a press release, Mayor Dean lauded the ensemble as “one of the nation’s only all-volunteer ensembles of accomplished professional musicians which donates 100 percent of its concert proceeds to community nonprofits with ‘no strings attached.’”

Indeed, “No Strings Attached” is how Alias has described its benefit concerts, in which the ensemble performs and the intermission features the nonprofit director on the stage addressing the gathering. All ensemble members play a role in selecting nonprofits to sponsor, and the group

performs three concerts a season.

“It’s challenging for musicians, with our unpredictable schedules, to volunteer the way most nonprofits want,” says Bowers. “The ensemble allows us to do something we love artistically, but also to contribute to the community.”

Bowers, Jaskunas, and Leslie Norton all have “day jobs” in the Nashville Symphony Orchestra, Bowers says, while Chris Norton serves on the music faculty of nearby Belmont University.

She notes that the group has retained all but one member since it began in 2002. “That’s pretty awesome for a group of musicians who are performing three concerts a year for free,” says Bowers. She adds that one reason for the members’ loyalty to the group is their shared sense of ownership. The musicians not only choose the nonprofits, but also the group’s repertoire—something orchestral musicians don’t ordinarily have the opportunity to do.

The process—in which all members’ preferences are taken into account—can result in some eclectic shows. But Bowers says that’s not a problem.

“I guess the general theme for our concerts is, ‘Our musicians love this music!’” she says. And that works well with American audiences. “We’re used to having Italian for lunch and, say, Peruvian for dinner. We’re used to that kind of diversity.”

—Karen McCally