



photo by Zamná Avila

Kimberlee Woods - Empowering a community

By Caitlin Crest

ONCE IN A WHILE, life grabs you by the ankles, turns you upside down and shakes all the loose change out of your pockets. By the time you are returned to an upright position, you realize that the landscape is unfamiliar and your shoes have fallen off.

There is a choice to be made: Deny your intrinsic strength or take stock of where you are and set out to find the nearest shoe store.

Kimberlee Woods wears fabulous shoes.

Woods found her life's slate cleared seven years ago. Everything from a long-term relationship, to friends, job and home, seemed to just disappear.

"But I learned a wonderful lesson," Woods said. "I learned that those things didn't define me and I began actively seeking to know what was truly important to me."

Several years prior Woods met Marty McComb, who was the executive director of The Center

Long Beach, a core organization for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people in the city.

"I remember thinking, 'That's something I would like to do,' but I didn't give it any more thought," Woods said. "I couldn't have guessed how this would come into my day-to-day world."

In 2007, Woods stepped in to lead The Center Long Beach after serving as interim executive director of The Center Orange County for a short time.

Although she'd been involved with Long Beach community organizations for about 15 years, managing a nonprofit had not — up to that point — been part of the professional destiny she chiseled.

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans," said Woods with a bemused smile as she quoted John Lennon.

The career move came at a time when administrators were considering the sale of the build-

ing. Letting the community center go was "not OK," she said.

Woods set out to change the management climate of the 30-year-old organization.

"My first answer to the issues was to set up a completely transparent organization," she said. "The community has access to everything that's going on. We're not cloaked in any way, shape or form these days."

She describes herself as logical and visionary. "Once I get an idea in my head, I move toward it — sometimes relentlessly," she said, laughing. "I think one of the most important obstacles we're up against is this job of clearing out the old energy. The Center has a systemic history and we've got to find a way to let the community know that we're not part of that old way of doing things."

Woods sees a day when The Center is once again the hub of the community, when several social service agencies are working hand-in-hand to offer the services, entertainment and pastimes that will appeal to a vast and diverse audience. The Center already provides a venue for HIV-AIDS testing, one-on-one counseling, discussion groups, community referrals and other services, but Woods has a vision that is much more expansive.

"I can see us adding on-site, affordable LGBT senior housing, a live theatre, film festivals (the first took place this past year) — even a basketball court for pickup games on our Southern California summer evenings," Woods said, glowing with enthusiasm. "The possibilities are just endless. I can truly see a thriving community center happening here."

While it's clear that Woods' presence is changing the face of The Center's history, she is unassuming about her influence.

"I just love walking in the world each day, knowing who I am and where I'm going, and where I can lead this great organization," she said. "The best part is the journey," she said.

Kimberlee Woods has a bachelor's of psychology from Vanguard University, Costa Mesa, a master's of divinity from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena and a master's in multicultural education from Cal State University Dominguez Hills.