



**ACLU activists and friends Jill Metz and Ronna Hoffberg. The two share an office on Chicago's North Side.
Photo by Andrew Davis**

Jill Metz: Law and Order

by Andrew Davis

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Jill Metz is many things, but idle certainly isn't one of them. In addition to running her North Side law firm, she is treasurer of the Chicago chapter of the Stonewall Democrats and is legislative liaison for the Lesbian and Gay Rights Committee of the Chicago Bar Association. She also supports several organizations, including the Lesbian Community Cancer Project, the Center on Halsted, Howard Brown Health Center and Equality Illinois. If all that isn't enough, Metz was recently elected as the new president of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois' board of directors, a position she assumed on Jan. 1. In case anyone thinks Metz is all business, however, her rather large Pez dispenser collection speaks to her senses of whimsy and fun.

Metz sat down with Windy City Times and revealed her thoughts on everything from growing up in Michigan to meeting with President Bush (hypothetically speaking).

Windy City Times: Tell me about growing up.

Jill Metz: I grew up in Michigan. I lived in Niles during my junior high and senior years; before then, I lived in the suburbs of Detroit. Niles was a lovely place to grow up. At one time, it was a

pretty industrial boomtown because it had lots of train tracks that went through the town. However, as manufacturing decreased around the country, it did so in Niles as well.

Now, it's coming back. I just had my 35th high-school reunion. Niles had been run down but there's a river that runs through town so they've redeveloped the riverfront. Although it doesn't look like Naperville and doesn't have its affluence, Niles has a little bit of that feel to it because of the river that functions as a gathering place. The town also has a good hospital and they've saved most of the downtown buildings.

I decided I wanted to go someplace out of Michigan for college. Because my parents weren't affluent, I couldn't pick outrageously expensive out-of-state schools. Somehow, I became aware that Kentucky's out-of-state tuition was about the same as Michigan's in-state tuition. I ended up going to Western Kentucky, which was a delightful place to go to school. (My parents moved to Naperville during my college years.) However, I knew I couldn't stay in Kentucky—even though I enjoyed it—because it was the South, and I'm clearly not from the South.

I applied to a smattering of law schools across the country. I wanted to go someplace urban because I had done my rural experience in Kentucky.

WCT: Why law?

JM: I found that most of my questions ended up being connected with law. I don't have lawyers in my family and I had never been inside of a courtroom. However, things connected with political science and even psychology always led back to law. And I like school. I ended up working full-time as a law clerk while in law school but it didn't feel like a job.

WCT: You've been elected board president of the ACLU of Illinois. What direction would you like to see the organization go in?

JM: I think what the ACLU does most dramatically is cross a lot of areas because its goals and mission involve the protection of rights set forth in the Bill of Rights. So it deals with race relations; religious separation from state; free-speech issues; gay and lesbian rights; AIDS protection; reproductive rights; prisoners' rights; and other issues. So, it has this [expanse] that is its strength, so I would like the affiliate to work cooperatively with organizations—which it does on many levels. However, it needs to do more of that, and the lesbian and gay community is one of the best examples of how we don't work cooperatively with other organizations.

We're not unique; it's just human nature to worry that someone is going to take your donors. But, when you trust that you're doing good work and that you have common goals with people, you find that those fears don't take place. We, as well as Lambda Legal and Equality Illinois, have received a grant from The Proteus Foundation to do just that: to work together on an educational initiative about gay and lesbian families. It's a really good match, with each organization using its own resources to do this downstate initiative to talk with voters, who will hopefully talk with elected officials.

WCT: Do you think that same-sex marriage is the most pressing legal issue regarding the LGBT community?

JM: I think that, if accomplished, gay marriage is the most sweeping thing that happens. I've talked with people who haven't encountered any bias regarding housing and other things, but when you look at how our families are treated differently from heterosexual families in economic terms, access to [loved ones] in hospitals, and even riding in an ambulance

Some things you can correct with documents in a place like Chicago. However, in other areas, they might question the use of those documents. The reforms that marriage would implement would be massive, even with something like taxes. The fact is that others are building wealth and economy on our backs.

WCT: Give me one thing that the legal system does right and one that it does wrong.

JM: The most important thing that has been done correctly is that we have changed how we are perceived. When we eliminated the sodomy law, when we began to say that lesbian and gay parents couldn't lose their children because of [their sexual orientation]—those changes have been the most dramatic. Those are changes that first happened in the legislation and then getting judges to understand them. Now, judges have asked the question 'And so?' in a lot of areas.

What we [as components of the legal system] are doing wrong is acting as if [LGBT individuals] are any different than anyone else, anyway. When we get blamed for all the moral decay in this country and when any piece of anything takes that as real ... I mean 'don't ask, don't tell' in the military—it's like 'don't ask and don't tell' what? That it's in the legal system in any form is just wrong. We have a constitution that says that it's unconstitutional. It's going to take education, effort and [measures] pushed through in those states where things can be pushed through. You get those little pop-throughs and you move people.

WCT: I'm astounded by the fact that South Africa—which just ended apartheid a little over a decade ago—has approved same-sex marriage.

JM: Isn't that remarkable? It's almost as if others look at us and ask 'What's the rationale? Oh, it's a religious rationale or it's an ignorance rationale. We don't want to do that as a government.' We'll get there. We're behind other people and it's very, very sad.

WCT: How concerned are you about the Supreme Court?

JM: I am more concerned about the Court and reproductive-rights issues than with gay and lesbian issues. I think that our issues are not percolating up there right now.

WCT: You're involved in so many organizations. What motivates you to join or support a group?

JM: I guess it's two-pronged. Regarding the giving of money, I feel that clients pay me and I now have a pool of money that I should do things with to make everyone's life feel better.

The actual giving of my time makes my life richer, I believe. I have had wonderful learning experiences by giving my time. The work I did with the Andersonville Chamber of Commerce and the streetscape project, for example, involved putting together a plan that made everyone feel like they were participating. It was a great learning experience.

WCT: Here's a hypothetical. You manage to get five minutes with President Bush. What would you say to him?

JM: I would tell him that his use of language is very hurtful and that I don't expect him to change his policies, but he's doing a lot of damage by verbalizing and giving other people (through his verbalization) an acceptance to hate. If he doesn't intend on doing it, he should re-examine what he's doing. If he does intend to do it, then shame on him.

At a Glance: Jill Metz Proving that she's not all business, Metz heartily agreed to answer a few At-a-Glance questions: — Something she did in 2005 for the first time: 'I rode in The Five Boroughs Ride in New York City with 35,000 other riders. It was tremendously entertaining.' — Favorite vacation spot: 'I love Paris. It's a city; I love cities. It's culturally and architecturally beautiful. Also, I have a friend who's French and we all have a delightful time there.' — Favorite thing about Chicago: 'It's the lake. I think we're really lucky to be on this huge body of water. The park is wide open to everybody and every person can use it. We all own it.' — Last bad movie she saw: 'It was *The Interpreter*; it was awful. Nicole Kidman's acting was good but the plot was ridiculous.' — Favorite guilty pleasure: 'Wine. I love wine. I like bordeauxs, especially. I have cases and cases.'