

From the director's desk...

By Dan Petegorsky

In early June some 700 people packed Boise State University's Special Event Center to celebrate the life and mourn the sudden death of Brian Bergquist. A dear friend and inspiring leader to many not only in Boise but throughout our region, Brian's passing was front page news in the Idaho Statesman, and received lengthy coverage from Boise television stations as well.

What propelled Brian to such visibility was his leadership in the No on One Campaign in 1994. That campaign succeeded in defeating a ballot initiative that would have denied Idahoans the right to pass laws providing civil rights protections for gays and lesbians. The ballot victory, together with the defeat of a similar measure in Oregon and the failure of another anti-gay initiative even to reach the ballot in Washington, marked the height of one of the most remarkable organizing successes our region has seen over the last decade.

Coming in one of the most conservative states in the nation, the Idaho victory in which Brian played so key a role marked a genuine transformation in the way issues of human dignity have been viewed in Idaho — a transformation evidenced in the remarkable outpouring of tribute for Brian not only by his friends and co-workers, but in the mainstream media as well.

For many progressive constituencies, success in elections has not been either a high priority or an achievable goal. Leaders and members alike have been reluctant to become involved in an area that demands both so many tactical compromises and such great expenditures of resources. Too often, organizations have emerged from campaigns burned out, drained of money and energy, and hurting from internal fights over campaign strategy.

In the 1990s, however, the right wing developed a series of potent initiative strategies designed to swell the ranks of conservatives and drive up voter turnout by scapegoating and targeting racial and sexual minorities. Gays and lesbians found themselves in a battle that they were ill-prepared to fight, but which they could not avoid.

Those battles, fought out in largely in the 1992 and 1994 elections, were both painful and exhilarating. Ultimately, they provided progressives from multiple constituencies across the region a much deeper understanding of how their opposition worked. They also served to deepen our understanding of and commitment to gay rights issues and their importance to our broader vision.

Equally important, the campaigns generated both experience and leadership in using ballot initiatives to build and strengthen organizations and movements. The remarkable community that gathered to celebrate Brian Bergquist's life and work, and the accolades from a previously hostile press, gave testimony to this lasting achievement.

By contrast, while the right was broadly successful in using hot-button social wedge issue campaigns and gaining increased electoral power in the region, the effectiveness of organizations like the Oregon Citizens' Alliance and its clones in other states has faltered. Conservatives who relied on these groups as shock troops to bolster their campaigns have been far less eager to carry their water once in office. And the OCA itself has failed even to qualify an initiative for the ballot in the last two election cycles.

Noting this failure, *The Oregonian* summed up the situation in what may at the time have been a premature obituary for the OCA, but which reads as yet another tribute to the work of those who, like Brian, took up the call:

"The OCA campaigns were sometimes ugly and always disturbing. Their measures bitterly divided Oregonians, but they had one positive effect — they galvanized gay rights groups and other defenders of individual liberty."

The persistence of social issue wedge campaigns across the country tells us that such divisive tactics have not disappeared.



Thanks to people like Brian Bergquist, the days are gone when campaigns of harassment and intimidation will go unanswered.