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IN THIS ISSUE

SPECIAL RACIAL JUSTICE SECTION

Workers of Color
Challenge Barriers

Organizing Against
Rape & Racism

Beyond
Organizational
Racism

The Dismantling
Racism Project

ELECTORAL ORGANIZING BUILDS POWER

Gay Rights: Defensive
Battles Build
Movement Strength

Voter Mobilization
Around the Region

Publicly Financed
Campaigns



Who is America?

Gay Rights, Women's Rights, Racial & Economic Justice Threaten Conservative Vision of America

By Holly Pruett

In the past two years, voters have considered eighteen anti-gay ballot measures in statewide and local elections across the country. They passed thirteen of them and rejected only five.

"Why is it okay to pass legislation that restricts basic civil rights based on sexual orientation?" asks the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity's Eric Ward.

Ward, a Western States Center Board member, sees homophobic legislation as a symptom of the fundamental struggle for power in our democracy today.

"Who will be considered American? What will America look like? The gay community's very existence is a direct threat to the conservative vision of American," says Ward.

The trouble is, that conservative vision — and the issues at stake — are being obscured as never before.

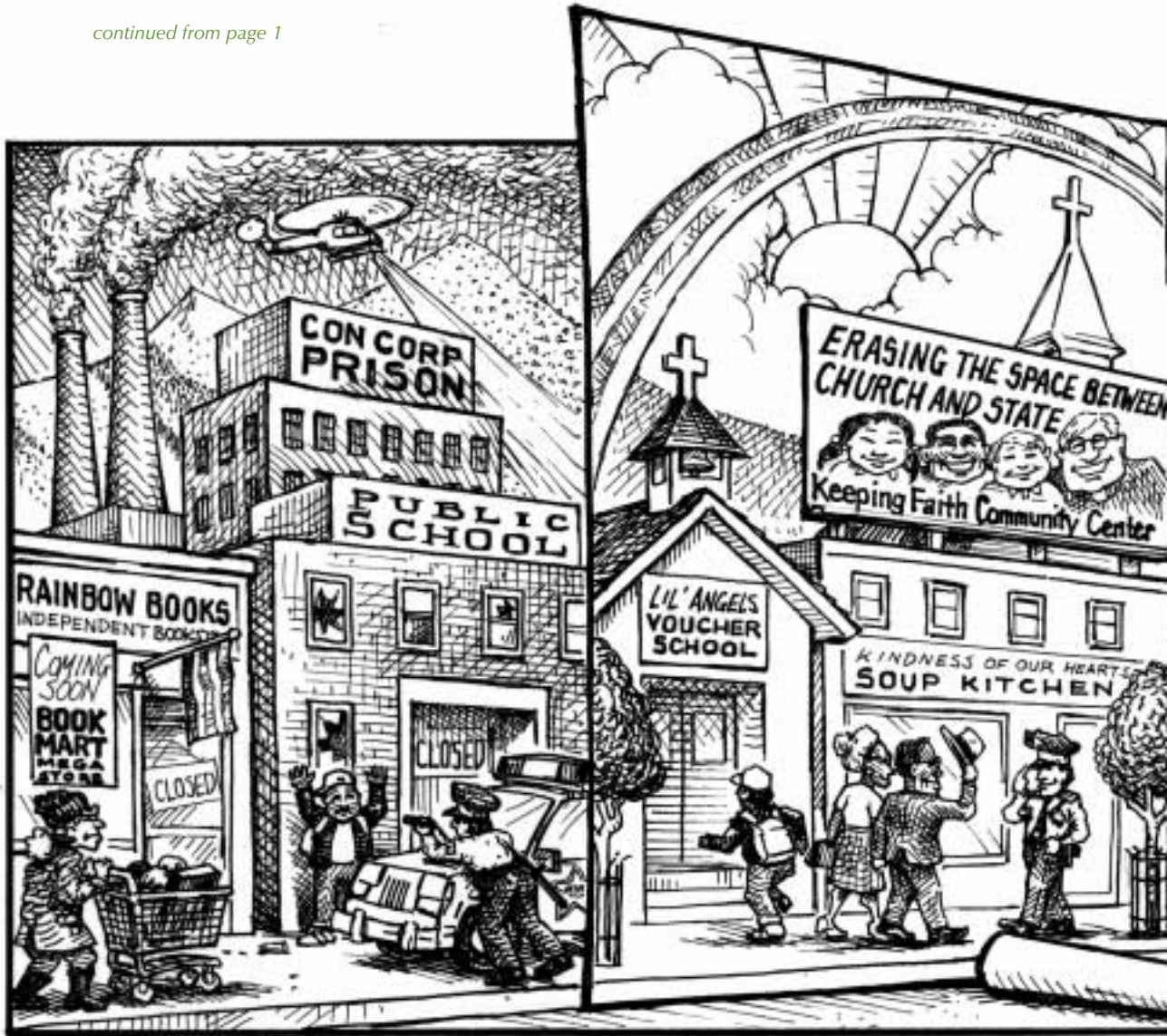
continued on page 8



Who is America?

continued from page 1

*“What will
America
look like?”*



Bitter Pills, Sugar Coated

Jean Hardisty, president and founder of Political Research Associates, notes that "the right-wing has transformed itself to become more acceptable, mainstream, quieter — at the same time as it's become more powerful and dangerous."

After the fall of Newt Gingrich and what Hardisty calls "red meat rhetoric," the right started to soften — not its goals, but its message. Hardisty points to the ex-gay movement, now overshadowing the "God hates fags" approach. "English first" is gaining popularity over "English only." Outright bashing of affirmative action is being replaced by calls (a la Ashcroft) for "racial parity." The days of the civil

rights movement are hailed by right-wingers who now rejoice in a "color blind" America. And it's all wrapped up with a big "compassionate conservatism" bow.

On the local level, Oregon's Lon Mabon — with dismal approval ratings after a dozen years as poster boy for the religious right — recruited a Latino teacher as chief spokesperson for his latest anti-gay measure. And the proponents of Nevada's "defense of marriage" initiative dressed up their ads with a "we are the world" rainbow of conservatives that made gay rights supporters look awfully pale in comparison.

Is this sugar coating intended to confuse voters,



“Who will be considered American?”

or simply to make bigotry more palatable?

Ward believes that voters know exactly what they're doing. He points to Washington State in 1998, where a progressive tide rolled through the ballot box. Voters approved a living wage law, protected women's reproductive rights, and threw right-wing politicians out of office. Yet they also abolished affirmative action. Similar results in other western states "seem like a contradiction," according to Ward, "until you look at which measures are about race."

Nevada's Liz Moore found homophobia just as fundamental a factor in the state's 70% approval of the "defense of marriage" amendment (DOMA,

which bans same-sex unions) to their constitution. Pro-DOMA forces positioned their campaign as "protecting Nevada law," but Moore didn't encounter a single voter on the campaign trail who was concerned about Nevada law (which already prohibits same-sex marriage). "That just gave them cover. People voted yes because of homophobia."

A kinder, gentler message — carried by increasingly diverse voices — masking racism and homophobia that's as virulent as ever, strengthened at the local level during the last decade and now returning to dominate national politics as well: it's a formidable set of circumstances for progressives.

Fortunately, we do know what to do about it.

continued on page 21

Who is America?

Oregon's Measure 9 Calls the Question *continued from page 9*

Organizing Works

"It's not a coincidence that Oregon was the only one of the six gay rights campaigns this year that won, and the only one of the six that did voter identification on a large scale," according to Dave Fleischer of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Oregon, which has been subjected to thirty-three (mostly victorious) anti-gay statewide and local ballot measures in the last twelve years, illustrates not only the power of systematic, multi-year organizational development, but also of an uncompromising commitment to person-to-person voter contact. In a race decided by a 75,000 vote margin, the campaign identified and turned out over 100,000 No on 9 voters.

Surveying the landscape of anti-gay measures, Fleischer observes, "The consistent pattern throughout is that when there is little or no campaign on our side, we lose and lose big (often by margins of 70%). Their side doesn't need to do much at all. Whether or not they mount a campaign, a certain number of people will always vote for them. Unless we organize, that certain number will represent a winning margin."

As a case in point, the Oregon Citizens Alliance spent less than \$200,000 to win 47% of the vote. The No on 9 campaign raised and spent seven times as much — over \$1.4 million — to achieve its still-too-close-for-comfort 53% victory. As Basic Rights Oregon's Jaime Balboa says, "We need to work so much harder to defeat these measures than they do to win them."

The experience of five other western states in the last two years underscores this lesson. The community of Fort Collins, Colorado, along with Alaska and Nevada — all dominated by conservative political forces — passed anti-gay measures. Yet so did Hawaii (which has a statewide law providing gay civil rights protections) and California (which has hundreds of organized GLBT groups and the largest number of openly gay elected officials in the country).

"For the right-wing to win in California, where our community ought to be strongest, and to win by *the same margin* as it did in places like Nebraska, really underscores that we just aren't doing the organizing

we're capable of," says Fleischer.

In the 2001/2002 election season, this hypothesis will once again be put to the test. Anti-gay measures have been floated or filed in Michigan, Florida, Nevada, Oregon, Washington and Massachusetts. Fleischer, the Energizer bunny of GLBT electoral capacity building, believes that "we don't have to keep facing these elections. We could start to put an end to them by winning more of them. The truth is, we know how to win them."

How Oregon Won

While Oregon hasn't faced a Defense of Marriage measure, this past year's Measure 9, "the Student Protection Act," pushed similar buttons. Besides bedrock homophobia, the No on 9 campaign had more than its fair share of obstacles: the measure wasn't officially certified until August 6th (and then appeared last on the printed ballot, buried in a quagmire of twenty-six other complicated measures); the ballot title language and official



Photo courtesy of Marty Davis/Just Out

Choosing popularity over purity, right wing candidates and ballot measures all over the country donned the drag of "compassionate conservatism." Nowhere were bedfellows stranger than in Portland, Oregon as fundamentalist police chief Mark Kroeker (center) cozied up to legendary entertainer Darcelle (left). Under fire for militaristic police practices and speeches advocating corporal punishment, submission of women and intolerance towards gays, Kroeker proved that — like much of the right wing — he's ready to get pragmatic.

continued on page 22

Who is America?

Oregon Campaign Proves Organizing Works

THE SUNDAY OREGONIAN • NOVEMBER 5, 2000

OCA efforts drove gay-r

continued from page 21

explanation were misleading (the Secretary of State admitted its mistake in the latter); and news coverage was biased (the state's major paper admitted its mistakes ten days after the election).

Fortunately, the campaign also had considerable assets.

Ever since the first Oregon Citizens Alliance anti-gay initiative in 1988 (their only statewide victory, later overturned in the courts), organizers have been working to use these inherently defensive campaigns as an opportunity to build the movement for gay rights. The original, infamous Measure 9 in 1992 intensified these efforts. While that bloody battle produced some brilliant organizing — like the creation of the Rural Organizing Project — it left a drained, dispirited community that was forced to do it all over again to defeat a sanitized version only two years later.

Heading into 1994's campaign, momentum increased to develop a permanent organization that could cultivate the movement's resources and build power both to defend against repeat attacks — and advance a proactive agenda. Basic Rights Oregon (BRO) emerged from the close but victorious No on 13 campaign and provided a foil to the OCA's failed attempts to get on the ballot in 1996 and 1998.

The 2000 campaign provided an opportunity to look back on this legacy and ask: Have we done more than defeat bad things on Election Day? Have we advanced our vision of building a movement?

The key ingredients of the No on 9 campaign's 53% victory reflect the capacity that's been built and the lessons that have been learned in Oregon:

Continuity

Having the experience of past campaigns institutionalized in BRO provided the campaign with:

- An initial list of 50,000 identified "no" voters
- A base of prior donors
- A track record of some electoral and political success
- An expectation in the community that their involvement would be needed as a critical component of the campaign

- A number of established relationships — increasingly reciprocal — with hundreds of organizations statewide
- Experience in leveraging national relationships
- A core group of proven and experienced strategists (*general consultant, pollster, media consultant, and steering committee members*)

In addition to these by-products of prior campaigns, No on 9 built on the continued progress made in the state between elections. In 1999, BRO's lobbying arm used its grassroots capacity to defeat nine anti-gay bills in the Oregon Legislature, including killing a DOMA referendum on the floor of the Senate after it passed the House. The Republican-controlled Legislature came within one vote of passing an employment non-discrimination bill. And thanks to the year-round, community-based work of groups like the Rural Organizing Project, new residents (many of whom have no idea who Lon Mabon or the OCA are), moved into communities where a discernable acceptance for gays and lesbians was present or growing.

At the same time, many organizers believe that the full potential of these ongoing resources has not yet been realized. Staff transitions at BRO (the new director was hired almost concurrently with the campaign manager) hampered momentum and too few veterans of past campaigns came forward. While the campaign didn't have to start from scratch, it wasn't fully in position until about two months before Election Day.

Commitment to movement building

While movement-building rhetoric may be gaining currency, few campaigns are able to defy the media dependency of the electoral industry. In a media-driven campaign, every dollar that goes into field organizing is a dollar stolen from the media buy (and the consultants who earn a good part of their pay off the sales commission). No one believes you can win a statewide contest like this

"We need to work so much harder to defeat these measures than they do to win them."

— Jaime Balboa
Basic Rights Oregon

ights groups to organize, mobilize

without media, but many, especially the "experts," believe you can win without field organizing. It takes stubbornness and audacity to defy those experts and insist on person-to-person contact with the voters.

No on 13 Campaign Manager Kathleen Sullivan, a grassroots organizer by trade, loves to dream about what could have been built if the \$750,000 spent on media could have been invested in organizing. It's a moot point: "I couldn't have raised money for it," she says. But with the unshakable commitment to movement building embedded in BRO, the campaign's consultants signed on knowing that the effort would include an aggressive field plan.

Aggressive it was: the campaign used 7,500 volunteers (in the final week, over 400 per day), to identify and turn out 100,000 No on 13 voters. (Another 60,000 voters were called by paid phoners.) A three-week-out rally drew over 3,500 people; a team of more than 90 trained volunteers worked the crowd, signing 585 of them up for specific phone shifts at specific locations.

The field plan's organizing principle was *velocity*. It had to get very big, very fast. In the early months, core leaders were cultivated through "retail organizing." Dave Fleischer, courtesy of NGLTF, worked with local organizers to conduct 100 interviews to select 30 potential leaders for advanced training. Sixteen of them played significant roles in the "wholesale" phases of mobilization. In three weeks, the number of Voter ID volunteers increased 400%. That meant the number of supportive voters each night contacted grew 400% too.

Fundraising, too, reflected the grassroots connections being built. Houseparties — 250 of them — raised \$280,000. The campaign received over 16,000 separate donations. Some of the resources were designated for projects like bilingual radio ads that — though minimally developed or funded — would never have passed muster in a traditional campaign.

Another sign of the heightened maturity of movement-building values was displayed in No on 9's collaboration with established grassroots groups eager to defeat the same measure. Marcy Westerling,

founder of the Rural Organizing Project (ROP), says, "In 2000, past fault lines between a short-term campaign mandate and a longer-term organizing mandate diminished. Mistakes always happen, but this campaign was characterized by the acknowledgement of past tensions, clarity on organizational roles, an exemplary spirit of cooperation and open communication, and a willingness to see the value of different yet coordinated approaches to the same end goal: defeating homophobia at the ballot box."

In another sign of the power of progressive alliances, Oregon teachers were by many accounts *the* major force in fighting this "Student Protection Act," despite facing seven other ballot measures targeting them.

National Resources

With the state a well-established battle-ground, several national organizations were persuaded to invest their resources, come to work on the ground as a team with local organizers, and hone their expertise to build the movement through campaigns elsewhere.

NGLTF sent ten volunteer organizers under Fleischer's wing — all graduates of his advanced training program — for twenty days in October. They tag-teamed with a ten-person cadre of volunteers from GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, who were in training to fight similar school-based homophobic attacks in their home states, along with a staffer from the Human Rights Campaign (which also helped fund polling).

By August the campaign had brought on Geri Washington (an experienced community and union organizer) as Deputy Campaign Manager, shifted three fundraising staff over to field, and was singularly focused on how to identify and mobilize the votes needed to win. Even so, the field plan relied on the infusion of talent and time from NGLTF and GLSEN, without which the program would have plateaued at a level insufficient to meet goals.

With the tensions typical of most state-national organizational relationships worked through in prior years, the 2000 campaign "demonstrated our

"In 2000, past fault lines between a short-term campaign mandate and a longer-term organizing mandate diminished."

— Mary Westerling
Rural Organizing Project

continued on page 24

Who is America?

Organizers Need to Face Question Head On

continued from page 23

national organizations at their best, providing critical and synergistic help," says Fleischer.

Discipline

"Ballot Measure 9 demonstrated the importance in a competitive climate of discipline in every aspect of the campaign: we did the research, wrote a campaign plan, raised the money we needed, and executed the plan — all in a short time frame," says NARAL's Lisa Horowitz, member of several generations of steering committees for anti-OCA campaigns. Goals, recalls Balboa, were "calculated

down to the last eyelash."

Supporters were coached in the messages the campaign knew could win (which also had to pass a do-the-movement-no-harm check). In the face of the OCA's "kinder, gentler" message, the campaign was forced to retrain both messengers and voters from years of appeals against discrimi-

nation, to a focus on the dangers of the measure to children and schools. This became a particular challenge in the midst of 25 other hard-fought statewide measures and the presidential campaign.

Message discipline was sorely tested when the news media latched on to the "reparative therapy" notions of the "ex-gay movement" and an out-of-state minister arrived to viciously harass Judy Shepard, mother of slain Matthew Shepard, in town to campaign against the measure.

The news bureau of state's main newspaper, *The Oregonian* (which staunchly opposed the OCA in its editorial stand) pushed the envelope of journalistic standards and campaign organizers' tempers repeatedly. The issue was framed in moral/religious terms, not as a human rights question; one article included a sidebar that was pure right-wing propaganda, a purported list of all the places that the Bible discusses (and of course condemns) homosexuality. An assigned reporter told campaign staff

that he believed the OCA was working to safeguard family, church and schools with its ballot measure. Every time No on 9 earned press coverage, Lon Mabon was given equal space — without doing anything except filing the measure. The paper's Public Editor later acknowledged half a dozen flaws in coverage that resulted from "bending over so far backward to be fair in a controversial situation that the paper did a virtual backflip."

In an intensely crowded, overheated political season, the No on 9 campaign charted its own winning course and stuck to it. Campaign architect Liz Kaufman knew from the start that "we had to do everything. If any one piece of the campaign had failed, the whole operation could have failed."

It wasn't always pretty, Kaufman says. "We were not 100% within each category of the campaign plan. But our campaigns don't have to be completely perfect. Experience helps, but it's good old fashioned hard work that pulls us over the top." "We won," believes Horowitz, "because we didn't take anything for granted."

Campaigns as a Tool

"The movement is in better position after the campaign than before," says BRO Director Balboa. The organization emerged with increased political capital and a newly energized base, already involved in both proactive and defensive efforts in the state legislature.

But campaign-level capacity can't be sustained, according to Balboa. "It's a logistical problem: our ongoing staff is too small to maintain volunteer mobilization at high levels." Kaufman agrees that a fundamental challenge in building movement is how to transfer the person-power from one campaign to the next.

Nevada's first experience with a statewide anti-gay ballot measure, despite their loss, supports the lessons learned in Oregon. Question 2, as a constitutional amendment, needs to be approved by voters twice to take effect. Its 70% win last November propelled it onto the 2002 ballot.

Because of the strength of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN), gay rights



Credit: Tarsio Luis Ramos

Jean Hardisty and Eric Ward urge the Western Progressive Leadership Network to tackle the right wing vision of America head on.

had made significant progress in the last few years. Sodomy laws had been repealed, hate crimes statutes now covered sexual orientation and — with labor strongly committed — protections against employment discrimination were won in the 1999 legislature. Nevada thus became the first in the Western States region and only the twelfth state in the U.S. to prohibit employment discrimination against gay, lesbian and bisexual workers. Question 2 was backlash, pure and simple.

Despite these recent gains, Nevada had no statewide GLBT advocacy organization. Equal Rights Nevada (ERN) was formed to fight the measure. It's staying in place to build power for the next fight.

Campaign manager Liz Moore says "Because we realized we'd be way outspent — and outmatched by both their campaign and the homophobia out there — we focused on using this as a tool to build our organization for the two year fight."

Establishing a base in both Reno and Las Vegas, they used houseparties to recruit volunteers (over 200 in Las Vegas alone) and fundraise. They identified and turned out 1,000 supportive voters. After extensive outreach to the GLBT community and allies, Moore reports, "Our letterhead had more clergy than theirs."

"The hardest thing," says Moore — especially now that ERN is without paid staff — "is to do enough asking. Folks are out there just waiting to get involved." The current legislative session provides an opportunity to strengthen ERN's mobilization capacity. Through the Family Fairness Act, introduced by openly gay Assemblyman David Parks, organizers also hope to educate voters about the real issues at stake in gay unions, such as the right to be with your partner if hospitalized.

Who is America?

Organizers in Nevada and Oregon are both using proactive legislation to try to focus voters on the fundamental human rights questions underlying the distortions of right-wing ballot measures. This cycle of electoral action and interim educational and political efforts, orchestrated by solid, well-connected,

permanent organizations, is only beginning to show its potential.

Oregon's experience proves that organizing over the long haul can and does work.

But the struggle for power in our democracy today will not be easily won. "Never underestimate homophobia," cautions Balboa; nor, as other campaigns demonstrate, can we ever underestimate racism. Anti-gay and race-based measures strike at the heart of our country's deepest troubles.

*Who will be considered American?
What will America look like?*

"Liberals," Eric Ward maintains, "have been afraid to engage with these questions. They've tried to push the questions to the background." Organizers in movement-building campaigns can't afford to ignore them.

Equal Rights Nevada is committed to making connections with Latino and African American voters. While the right "colored up" their messengers in the state, progressive organizers intend to build an authentic base around a shared analysis of discrimination.

The movement-building electoral campaigns taking shape across the region (see also pages 4-5) are reason for encouragement in an otherwise frightening political landscape. 🐸

Holly Pruett, Views editor, served as the deputy campaign manager for Oregon's 1994 No on 13 campaign, authored The No on 13 Campaign: a Case Study in Movement Building Through Electoral Organizing, and launched Western States Center's annual movement-building campaign training track at CSTI.

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Credit: Tarsio Luis Ramos

Liz Moore of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, Campaign Manager for Equal Rights Nevada, and participant in Western States' organizer training program, WILD.