

Three organizers review *The Stranger Next Door: the Story of a Small Community's Battle over Sex, Faith and Civil Rights* by Arlene Stein

Lessons from Timbertown: “a classic organizing drive we can all learn from”

The Twin Towers' collapse on September 11th eclipsed the nation's memory of another act of terror, the work of Timothy McVeigh, who was executed just three months prior for his role in the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal building in 1995. While imported acts of terror dominate the national consciousness, domestic terror remains a part of the American landscape.

The West, particularly, is familiar with the political extremism that nourishes hate groups, militia, and attempts at electoral exclusion of whole classes of people. Sociologist Arlene Stein's *The Stranger Next Door* examines the impact on “Timbertown,” the pseudonym given a small town in Oregon subjected to a divisive local ballot measure by the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Her book is reviewed by three organizers from Oregon, Montana, and Wyoming. Their comments illuminate both the personal dimensions and the organizing challenges of living next door to the opposition.



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Elli Work



Elli Work is a long-time political activist who ran twice for the Oregon Legislature from a rural district as an out lesbian and is a retired officer from the Oregon Army National Guard. She currently lives in Portland.

1 Understanding the Stranger Next Door

As an activist from Central Oregon in the '90s, I tried to heed the advice of the Chinese warrior Sun Tsu. He said, “If you know the enemy and yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.” And so I listened to Christian radio for most of the '90s. It taught me as little about the Religious Right as watching a video of skin, leather and sweat at San Francisco's Gay Pride taught the Right about gays and lesbians.

It was not until the smoke cleared and the charred landscape was patched that Oregon activists began to see — and learn in earnest — the connection between economic injustice and oppression. The link between homophobia and racism was less clear, until leaders like Suzanne Pharr and progressive lifelines like the Rural Organizing Project started connecting the dots. Now the picture is complete with Arlene Stein's data collection, analysis and interpretation of the Religious Right's attack on gays and lesbians in Oregon from 1988 through the 1990s in her book *The Stranger Next Door: the Story of a Small Community's Battle over Sex, Faith and Civil Rights*.

Stein systematically examines and explains the rise, popularity and political power of conservative Christians in small any-town Oregon. She focuses on the economic shifts and changing social norms that fueled the anxiety, fear and then hate of people who would otherwise be described as “good folk.” Stein makes the stunning revelation that their “born again” stories are very similar to gay and lesbian coming out stories; that the post-timber era shattered their sense of community at a time when queers were developing and strengthening their own sense of family and community; and that in tough economic times, no one seemed to be championing their cause.

Stein, the keen social scientist, has produced a thorough and informative book that can and should be read by anyone who is interested in the very nature of oppression and who cares about changing the underlying causes that make oppression possible. It isn't really about knowing the enemy: it's about understanding the stranger next door.

— **Elli Work**

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Beyond the Compromise of Sameness

As the angst of struggling communities grows and we turn local and national attention to the sources of estrangement we experience, Arlene Stein's interviews, media research and scholarly assessment provide another tool to make communities work better for all people.

Stein's Timbertown mirrors my home-base as a community organizer in Wyoming, a human landscape captured in two stanzas by Lander poet Laurie Sain:

He jump-starts my frozen pick-up; I feed his snow-bound stock. We hate each other's votes, but in the spring we mend fences anyway.

Stein holds her researcher's lens over the poet's pivot point defined by opposing votes and fence mending. She examines neighbor-to-neighbor conflict as she unwinds an analytic narrative like a rancher stretching barbed wire between fence posts. She lays bare historical and contemporary neglect of the barbs' three-corner tears in tender flesh, which fester, yielding unforeseen challenges to individual and community well-being.

Rural areas don't have high population densities; our sparseness is our glue. At this scale we have a clue that we need each other. Lest we forget in Wyoming, winters always remind us that neighbors can and do save our very lives. This can lead to honest care between some friends and acquaintances: the easy coasting of neighborly living that comes from relying on each other.

The currency we exchange for neighborliness is being careful what we say. Sometimes, we move into a compromise of sameness or not saying too much. It is that constructed smoothness between the barbs that lulls us all into thinking that we are one big, back-slapping, toe-tapping, happy little town. Stein examines the complex interrelationships of Timbertown's residents: the lesbian bookstore owners, the wide ranging opinions in the small high

school, the children caught in the parents' cross-fire, the perception of queerness laid upon straight allies, the Christian churches' differing denominational doctrines and the city councilors who are parents to lesbians.

Stein's research affirms rural, grassroots organizers in two ways. First, we live alongside folks who disagree with us. We see an immediate consequence of disagreement, none of it comfortable, so we struggle quietly and in cliques. While that struggle helps us gain an apparent footing, it does nothing to solve the dilemma of discord. Lying in the arms of those with whom we agree, we have a couple of choices. We can demonize opponents as has been the habit through the ages. Or, we can stand in the chaos to create something new, which is really one of the strengths of queers: seeing the possible in the tension.

Stein comes in with the second affirmation cloaked as a challenge – find common ground. The personal is political, Stein shows, is a mantra for both evangelical born-again Christians and queer rights activists. Stein's willing interviewees on both sides of the ballot measure revealed the commonalities of community struggle: separation and individual angst over anti-gay measures. Stein gives rural community organizers a chance to look over the fences erected by presumed opponents. We are given glimpses of their humanity and challenges to our own stereotypes.

— **Debra East**

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The success of the "No Special Rights" campaign against gay men and lesbians is an enduring lesson for organizers.

— **Christine Kaufmann**

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Debra East



Debra East is a 46 year-old lesbian community organizer who has lived in Lander, Wyoming, nearly half of her life.

She is Community Organizer for the Wind River Country Initiative for Youth, a project of United Gays and Lesbians of Wyoming, Inc.

Lessons from Timbertown

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3 An Enduring Lesson for Organizers

A light went on for me when I heard a former public relations person for the now defunct Aryan Nations tell me he used the spotted owl controversy in rural communities to recruit converts to bigotry. The communities he selected were splitting apart for a variety of economic reasons. It was easy to pick out enemies and demonize them. People were fearing change and looking for someone to blame. The Aryan Nations had no particular interest in the spotted owl, only in the opportunity it provided.

Not surprisingly, the spotted owl controversy appears in, and serves almost exactly the same function in *The Stranger Next Door*. Gay men are stereotyped and demonized in Timbertown, even though there was no direct link between gay life and logging, gay men were nearly invisible, and none of them fit the stereotype. The industry was in decline and the people were feeling it. Enterprising organizers on the right saw the opportunity.

The Stranger Next Door is a manual for organizers. Its most insightful passages illustrate well how the lines between conspiracy theorists, property rights advocates, gun rights warriors, anti-public education radicals and homophobic extremists blur together at the local level in rural communities. Many times it is the same activists propping up all these causes, being willing to set aside their primary concern in the face of a clearly defined campaign.

By shaping the message, seasoned organizers were able to move their campaign out of the churches and into anti-government circles, convincing many who were primarily concerned about economic dislocation that homosexuality was the real problem. By carefully using an environmentalist as a spokesperson, the OCA was able to divide the likely coalition that might have been expected to unite progressives to support human rights. The “real” issue playing itself out in Timbertown was about land and place, not sexuality.

Environmentalists could have been the targets; they should have aligned with the queers. Instead they were coopted or silenced by their adversaries.

It was a classic organizing drive we can all learn from.

The success of the “No Special Rights” campaign against gay men and lesbians chronicled in *The Stranger Next Door* is an enduring lesson for organizers. In a few short years the concept of civil rights was completely turned on its head. Instead of a society recognizing inherent unfairness and moving to correct it, targeted groups of people are seen as flawed and undeserving of civil rights. Civil rights are then cast, not as correcting a societal wrong, but as special rights to be handed out to people who have corrected the error of their ways and are now deserving. The important thing Stein points out is that it didn’t “just happen.” It was designed and organized by people who knew exactly what they were doing and who took their tactics straight from the progressive campaigns of the ‘60s. We can relearn these lessons — and more power to us.

— **Christine Kaufmann**



Christine Kaufmann has been co-director at the Montana Human Rights Network for nine years where she continues to serve as policy and research director.

She was a lobbyist at the Montana State Legislature for human rights, environmental, and pro-choice organizations for 12 years before being elected as an out lesbian to her first term as a state representative in 2000.

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