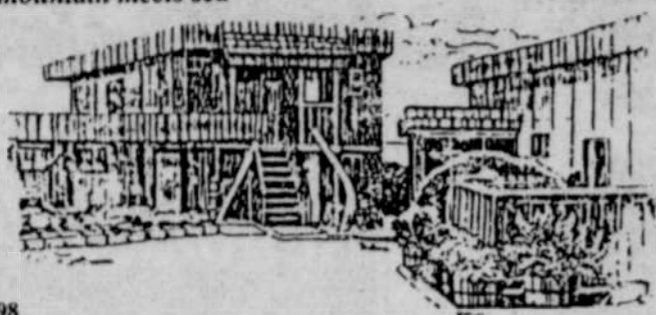


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Brainstorming session

The first statewide gathering drew over 150 people to develop strategies to defeat OCA-sponsored initiative

by Inga Sorensen

An estimated 150 lesbians, gays, and their supporters congregated recently in a Salem church basement to share ideas and information about how to defeat a proposed ballot initiative that seeks to amend the state constitution to declare homosexuality a "perversion." The July 20 collective brainstorming session attracted civil rights supporters from across Oregon, marking the first statewide gathering designed to bring together diverse constituencies and begin to develop strategies to defeat the Oregon Citizens Alliance-sponsored initiative.

Members of the Portland Lesbian Choir kicked off the five-hour meeting at the First Congregational Church by providing song and inspiration. Participants then listened to an abridged history of the conservative OCA, shared ideas about possible barriers to creating a successful anti-initiative campaign, pondered ways to overcome those barriers, and discussed the pros and cons of a proposed campaign structure. The gathering was organized by the Interim Anti-OCA Measure Organizing Group, a collection of various organizations ranging from the Right to Privacy PAC and American Civil Liberties Union, to the National Leather Association and Queer Nation. Representatives from religious groups, social organizations, labor unions, and non-gay supportive groups such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, were also among those on hand.

The need to respect such diversity was, in fact, a re-emerging concern among participants at the meeting. Many stressed that it is essential that gays and lesbians "not trash one another" and instead unite to defeat the OCA. Many also called for forming solid bonds with others both within our community, and non-gay population as well.

Scot Nakagawa of the Coalition for Human Dignity, a group that monitors extremist, rightwing organizations such as the OCA: "The OCA's most recent act of forming pro-troop rallies during the Gulf War was the most significant step they have taken to broaden the scope of issues they are involved with. They've legitimized themselves to a larger audience...they are now in a much more popular position than they have been in the past," explained Nakagawa. He added that during the OCA's four-year existence, it has opposed state-aided pre-kindergarten programs, state divestment from South Africa, parental leave measures, reproductive freedoms, and basic civil rights for lesbians and gays. "What the OCA does is work to create these voter blocks, which they then use to leverage themselves into different positions of power." The scheme, he says, is paying off. "When the OCA ran its vice-chair Al Mobley as its pro-life, independent candidate for governor last election, they did so to punish the Republican Party's candidate David Frohnmeyer for not taking anti-choice, anti-gay stances. They split the Republican vote and gave Barbara Roberts the election. That move gave them the political clout to make alliances with the Republican Party."

Political observers agree, pointing to Oregon Senator Robert Packwood's recent dialogues with the OCA. Many believe that Packwood, who is pro-choice, is attempting to appease the group so it doesn't run a candidate and possibly split the vote during his re-election bid.

Nakagawa adds that the OCA is extremely

effective in appealing to disenfranchised citizens who yearn for "the good old days" that never really existed. "Their No Special Rights campaign is sort of the kick in the ass that gets them going," he says. "The traditional family values concept is the carrot that continues to lead them forward." Remember, too, that appeal seemingly reached into the hearts and minds of the 586,311 Oregonians who voted in favor of Ballot Measure 8.

While Nakagawa's message was a serious one, his presentation didn't appear to leave participants with a sense of hopelessness. In fact, shortly following that analysis, the audience split into smaller groups where members engaged in enthusiastic, active dialogue about possible barriers to creating an effective anti-initiative campaign, and ways to overcome those barriers. Among the most commonly mentioned barriers were the lack of coalition-building and organizing skills among the gay and lesbian community, internalized homophobia, apathy, a lack of clear, unified message and strategy, poor media access, questions about how to handle divisive issues, and the problem of community in-fighting.

Proposals to build a strong, unified campaign, meanwhile, included the need to respect diversity, create coalitions, conduct outreach campaigns to rural areas, conduct a media blitz especially in the counties where Ballot Measure 8 won, encourage active participation among supporters within the religious and business communities, and develop effective lines of communication among all the groups involved in the campaign.

Toward the end of the meeting, organization representatives discussed the merits of a specific campaign structure proposal put on the table by some members of the interim organizing committee. With the aid of a hired campaign consultant, those members drew up a draft that outlines a four-pronged campaign structure. It calls for the creation of a grassroots network consisting primarily of individuals working on a volunteer basis. Under the plan there would also be a Coalition Council composed of designated representatives from all supportive organizations statewide. Its role would include recruiting new organizations, holding regular statewide meetings, developing an appropriate form of internal communication, and activating and informing its memberships. There would also be a Technical Group composed of people with campaign experience and "demonstrated political and organizing savvy." It would hire a campaign manager, and essentially make the decisions about the campaign's strategy, budget, and media and fundraising plans. Finally, additional staff would be brought on to help with various aspects of the campaign.

Reaction to the proposal was mixed. Some said it was better than no structure at all, while others questioned whether the plan was democratic enough. Many stressed the importance of trusting the individuals who would be making the decisions.

While the plan is just a preliminary proposal, Right to Privacy's Welch says she'd like to see a campaign structure in place by the end of September, at which point the Interim Anti-OCA Measure Organizing Group will dissolve. Until then, anyone interested in becoming involved in the interim committee should contact the Right to Privacy PAC at 228-5825.