

OCA submits signatures

Campaign for a Hate Free Oregon believes Portlanders are more tolerant than the OCA

by Inga Sorensen

Describing it as a "heroic" feat, the conservative Oregon Citizens Alliance submitted 22,875 signatures for its initiative designed to overturn Portland's civil rights ordinance banning discrimination based on sexual orientation. In order to get the measure on the May 19 primary ballot, the group needs 17,542 valid signatures. Many political observers believe the initiative will be on the ballot. City and Multnomah County officials have 30 days to count and verify the signatures.

"This is one of the most heroic feats in petition gathering," OCA Executive Director Lon Mabon said Jan. 21, the group's submission deadline, as he and OCA Multnomah County Director Bill Casey turned in their petitions. Both applauded their volunteer's efforts to collect signatures. They maintain those efforts were severely hampered by violent attacks from "homosexuals and their supporters." A series of legal challenges from businesses not wanting the group gathering signatures on their property was another setback. "The homosexuals and their allies tried to sabotage our efforts to collect signatures," Casey accused. "Our volunteers were spit upon, physically assaulted, threatened and verbally abused. In numerous instances, filled petition forms and voter registration cards were stolen and/or destroyed."



Participants at the No On Hate rally Jan. 21, where over 200 people gathered at Terry Schunk Plaza to focus attention on the upcoming campaign.

The OCA is seeking to overturn a civil rights ordinance unanimously approved Oct. 3 by the Portland City Council. That measure includes banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations. Human rights supporters have been working vigorously to counter the OCA's vitriolic attacks on the lesbian and gay community. Many say while they're disappointed by the OCA's apparent success in collecting enough signatures, they are not surprised.

"We would have been surprised if the OCA did not collect enough signatures," explains Sherry Oeser, chair of Campaign for a Hate Free Oregon, the statewide effort to defeat the OCA's anti-gay initiatives. "Portland has literally hundreds of thousands of residents. The OCA only needed to collect a little over 17,000 valid signatures, and they've proven their ability to collect signatures in the past. We would have been incredibly surprised if they were not able to gather this relatively insignificant number."

She adds, "Our job now is to convince citizens not to vote for the initiative at the ballot box." That work, she says, is already underway. In fact, the morning after the OCA submitted its signatures, the Campaign for a Hate Free Oregon officially kicked off its campaign. Representatives from the broad-based coalition held a news conference at Portland's Trinity Episcopal Church. The coalition is comprised of labor, religious, business and community groups.

"Portlanders are more tolerant and more fair than this OCA initiative. This type of measure is not the Portland we know," said campaign spokeswoman Ellen Lowe. She is also the associate director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, an organization representing more than 2000 religious denominations and congregations throughout the state. EMO, Oregon's Catholic Conference, and Temple Neveh Shalom are among the religious organizations that have publicly denounced the OCA's efforts and vowed to work to defeat them.

"I think the most important thing we can do is get to know one another," Lowe told the supportive crowd. "We think education is vital. We'll be talking to the public about the dangers regarding the OCA's initiatives. We'll put out fact sheets. We're prepared to go out and raise funds for a media advertising campaign if we need to."

When asked whether EMO would urge pastors to preach against the measure from their pulpits, she replied, "I think pastors have already started sending out the message that bigotry and intolerance are not right, and that peaceful co-existence is. Whether it be the temple or the church, the call to end such bigotry is being sent out."

Those interested in sending donations or getting involved with the Campaign for a Hate Free Oregon can call (503) 245-5351.

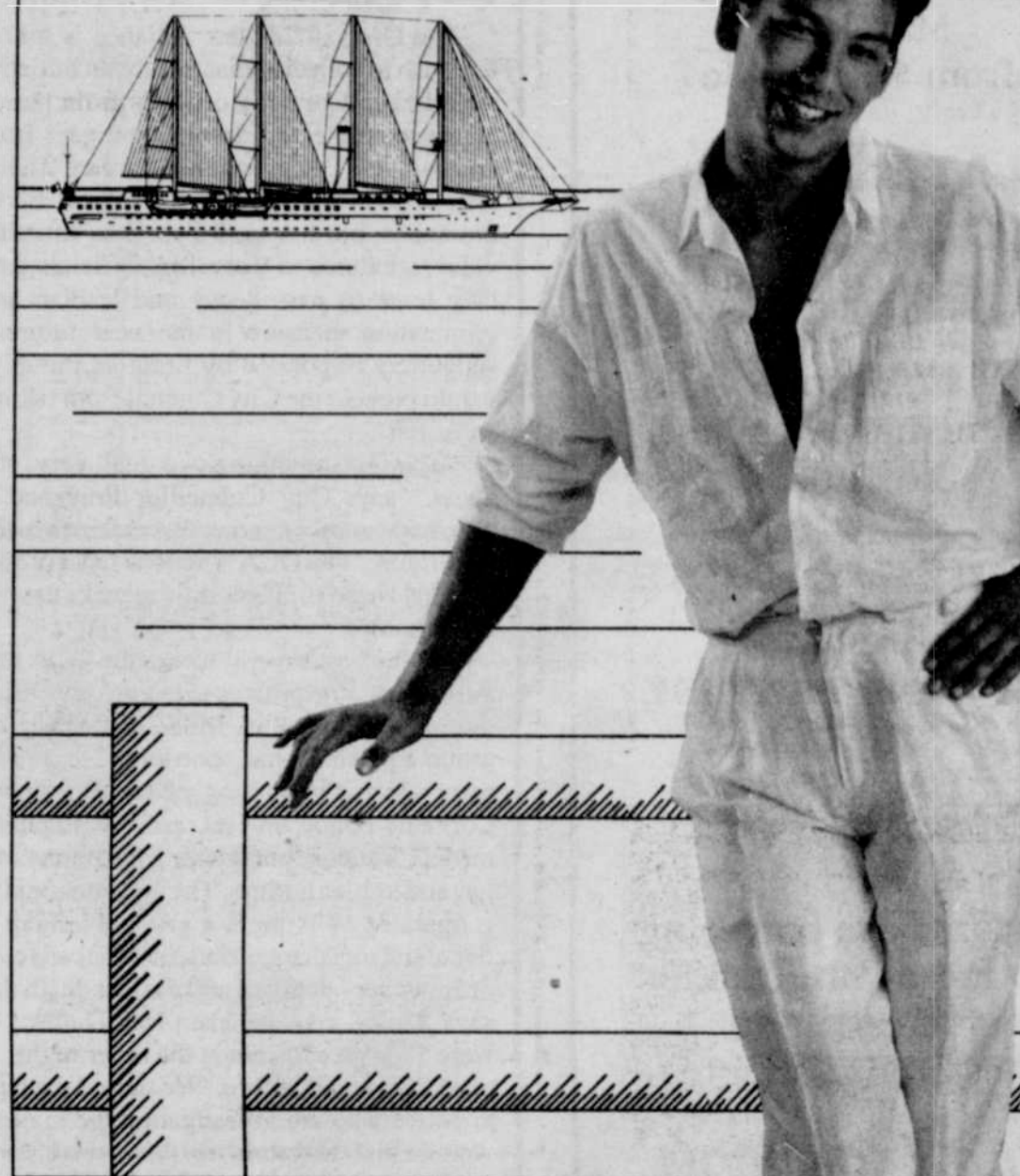


Bob Ralphs dispatches Bigot Busters, between chores, from his ranch near Sherwood.

Lesbian and gay rights supporters deny that charge. Bob Ralphs, one of those who organized and dispatched "bigot busting" squads to OCA signature-gathering locations says, "We would never think of becoming disruptive. Our purpose was to hand out literature and talk to the public on a one-to-one basis. We were there to educate them about our position against bigotry and hatred," Ralphs continues. "If anybody was violent, it was the OCA petitioners. We know of instances where our people were shoved and pushed by them for no apparent reason."

Not only do both camps contend they are victims of the other's violence, they're also charging one another with possible election law violations. Election officials, meanwhile, say they are investigating some of the complaints but don't know if they'll amount to anything.

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