

TIME TO SHOUT IT OUT...AGAIN

Ballot Measure 13 and National Coming Out Day underscore the fact that coming out is an ongoing process

by Inga Sorensen

nated the more inflammatory language found in Ballot Measure 9 but sought the same goal: to bar civil rights protections based on sexual orientation.

On paper, it looks like the OCA is on a roll. Two dozen communities have approved Son of 9 initiatives, and the OCA has succeeded in getting a watered-down version of Ballot Measure 9 on November's statewide ballot. But some civil rights advocates say it is time to stop measuring victory by counting votes. They say true change comes about slowly, rising first from within the individual, who in turn reaches out to transform society.

"I came out publicly because of Measure 9," says Greg Jackson, executive director of Right to Privacy, a statewide gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization. During that campaign, Jackson was living a closeted life as a Portland television news producer. "Like so many people, I was very torn up over the initiative. In the midst of this battle, I read an article about [then Lesbian Community Project executive director] Donna Red Wing in *The Oregonian*, in which she said the single most important thing we can do as lesbians, gay men and bisexuals is be honest about our identities with the people around us.

"Around the same time, I received a call from *Just Out* asking if I could be profiled for an article about out professionals in the workplace. I said, 'Well, I'm not out,' but I still agreed to do the interview. At that point I approached my staff and came out to them. It was such an empowering experience, but it was very scary." Jackson ultimately left his news job to head up RTP, one of the most powerful gay and lesbian political action committees in the nation.

There are no charts or statistics documenting just how many people came out due to Ballot Measure 9, but it (as well as the local civil rights struggles that soon followed it) appears to have been a significant catalyst in motivating people to become more open about their identities. Other well-known gay men and lesbians who came out publicly during that time are state representatives George Eighmey and Cynthia Wooten. The two Democrats are among the five openly gay, lesbian and bisexual incumbents serving in the state legislature. Additionally, two gay male Republican candidates—Jerry Keene and Chuck Carpenter—are currently making bids for state legislative seats. Only Rep. Gail Shibley was publicly out pre-Ballot Measure 9. Oregon now leads the nation in the number of openly gay, lesbian and bisexual legislators.

"I was out in various ways, but I really came out publicly when I was debating [OCA official] Scott Lively at Lincoln High School before 800 students," says Eighmey. "Lincoln High was the school my daughter had attended, and when she was there I was the chair of the Dads' Club. Because of my past associations I was introduced as a member of the Lincoln High 'family,' and—at my urging—a gay man. I got so much support from the kids it was fantastic. Ever since then it's been a constant coming out."

Continued on next page



PHOTOS BY LINDA KLEWER

Oregon's five out gay legislators backed by other candidates at the 1994 Lucille Hart dinner

In an age of "lesbian chic," television commercials featuring homebody gay men sofa-shopping, and sweaty women grinding together in an erotically charged Melissa Etheridge music video, the phrase "coming out" may seem a tad dusty. Despite this explosion of trendy queer depictions—largely generated by mass media and hungry marketers—many gay and lesbian activists say coming out remains one of the most difficult yet necessary processes an individual will undertake in his or her lifetime.

Unlike in decades past, the journey does not have to be a solitary one. Oct. 11 marks the annual National Coming Out Day, a time when gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are encouraged to come out to friends, family and co-workers. Coming Out Day may have special significance to Oregonians, who have seemingly been wrapped in an endless array of civil rights clashes during the past few years. Though expensive and exhausting, some say the experience has prompted a "mass coming out" and created a broad and substantive civil rights dialogue unparalleled nationwide.

"There is no doubt in my mind that residents [of] the Pacific Northwest are in a very different

place mentally and organizationally than citizens in other parts of the country," says Bonnie Tinker. Tinker is a lesbian grandmother and the host of *Love Makes a Family: Lesbians, Gays and Family Values*, a weekly talk show on KKEY 1190 AM, out of Vancouver, Wash. *Love Makes a Family*, which debuted shortly after the 1992 general election, highlights the belief that values such as love and compassion make a family, as opposed to the more rigid notion that family structure makes a family. Tinker's audience is mostly heterosexual. Her program is the only commercial radio talk show in the United States that deals specifically with lesbian and gay family matters.

"When I travel around the country doing workshops, I often hear comments like, 'Oh God, I'm so glad I don't live in Oregon.' Because these folks haven't been under a direct attack like we have, they're extremely fearful and often more closeted," she adds. "What they don't understand is that, thanks to Measure 9, gay men and lesbians have built a support community that reaches across the state, across gender and sexual orientation lines, across racial lines. People have come out of the closet in large numbers both as gays and our

supporters. This would have been unthinkable three years ago."

William Lunch, an Oregon State University political science professor and political commentator for Oregon Public Broadcasting, agrees. "The threat from Measure 9 was so intense and direct that it brought large numbers of people out of the closet. That threat stimulated the gay community into a higher level of activity," he says. "Many people felt they had to get involved. Some thought, 'I've lived my life in the closet and I'm still getting attacked, so I may as well be out and fight this thing.'"

Two years ago, nearly 640,000 Oregonians cast their ballots in favor of Ballot Measure 9, a proposed state constitutional amendment that declared homosexuality "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse." Also known as the Abnormal Behaviors Initiative, the proposal—touted as the *crème de la crème* of fundamentalist concoctions—was sponsored by the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Though Ballot Measure 9 lost statewide by a 56-44 percent vote, it passed in 21 of the state's 36 counties. The OCA quickly crafted "Sons of 9," local initiatives that elimi-