

Telephone activism

Gay men and lesbians in Oregon benefit from three long-distance carriers

by Inga Sorensen

The battle is heating up among long-distance telephone carriers to attract gay and lesbian customers.

Working Assets Long Distance company recently handed Oregon's No on 13 Committee a check for \$24,000 to help the organization defeat Ballot Measure 13, a proposed discriminatory initiative to be decided on by voters Nov. 8.

According to direct sales manager Sue Libow, Working Assets Long Distance is offering its 150,000 customers around the country an "easy way" to affect the upcoming election. Customers who checked a box on their bill agreed to contribute \$5 to three campaigns: Oregon's No on 13; the No on 1 campaign in Wyoming, which is fighting anti-abortion efforts there; and the yes on Proposition 186 campaign in California, which would create Canadian-style universal health care there.

"More than 14,000 customers have responded, raising \$74,000 for those three ballot initiative campaigns," says Libow. "No on 13 received a third of that, totaling \$24,000."

According to Libow, Working Assets selects about three dozen organizations every year that support environmental, social and economic justice issues, and contributes 1 percent of customers' total charges to those groups. The national Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and the American Civil Liberties Union's gay and lesbian and HIV-related projects are on that list this year. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, Greenpeace, and Handgun Control are among the organizations that have received donations in the past.

The company also says it divested \$2.7 million in holdings from the Dillard department stores earlier this year, in response to a complaint from a shareholder who indicated Dillard refused to register a lesbian couple with the bridal registry at one of its Florida stores. Working Assets' social research department also rejected for investment Discovery Zone, the nation's largest owner and franchiser of children's indoor entertainment and fitness facilities, after the company learned that children infected with HIV are banned from entering Discovery Zone's nearly 200 "FunCenters." Libow says Working Assets also offers its gay and lesbian employees full family benefits.

Working Assets isn't the only company reaching out to gay men and lesbians. CommunitySpirit, a gay-owned-and-operated long-distance carrier, says customers' concerns involving discriminatory efforts in Oregon have prompted the company to make some changes.

"We received a letter from one of our customers in Oregon who was concerned that we had contracted with WilTel," explains CommunitySpirit president Jeff Vitale.

According to a mailing sent out by the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the OCA will receive 2 percent of the revenues from a program offered through WilTel Inc., a major long-distance carrier.

"It's not really accurate that we had contracted with WilTel. What actually happened is that we

contracted with LCI International [another long-distance carrier] but LCI didn't have the necessary hardware in place in parts of Oregon and southern California, so LCI contracted with WilTel," explains Vitale. "We may have been associated with WilTel indirectly, but once we learned of this situation we knew we had to change it."

For its part, WilTel says it is simply the underlying carrier and has only an indirect relationship with the OCA. "Companies come to us and purchase large chunks of time. They in turn resell portions of that chunk to various agents. We don't even have records of these agents because there are literally hundreds of thousands of them," explains WilTel spokesperson Linda Laughlin. "We're not offering the 2 percent in revenues, it's actually the resellers or agents who can choose to do that. We just sell time on our network." The reseller in the OCA's case is the New Jersey-based Global Family Network.

According to Vitale, LCI is currently making hardware adjustments allowing CommunitySpirit to work directly with LCI, removing WilTel from the entire equation.

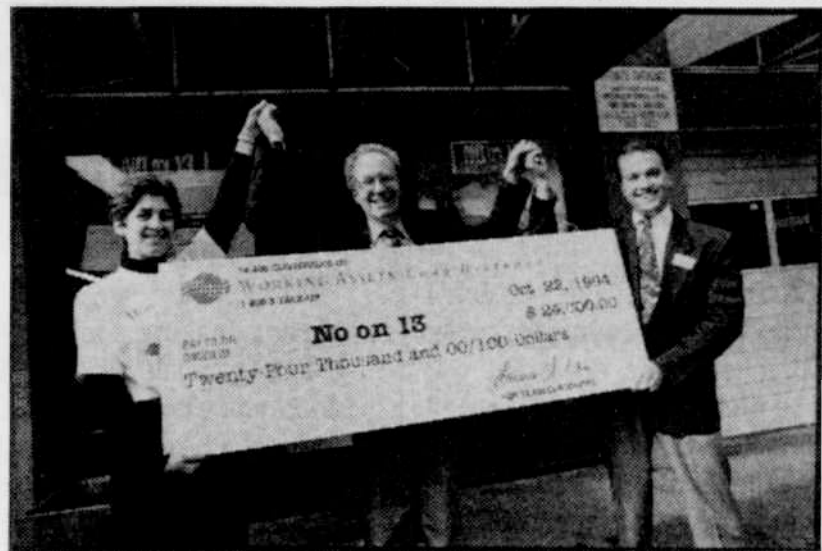
"It will take about two months to switch all of our Oregon customers over, but the process is already in motion," he says. "The last thing we want to do is have any connection to a right-wing radical group like the Oregon Citizens Alliance."

CommunitySpirit customers select gay, lesbian or HIV organizations they want their dollars to benefit. According to Vitale, each year 3 percent of the revenue generated by each customer goes to the organization she or he has selected. Groups in Oregon that have been named by customers include the Portland Lesbian Choir and the Rural Organizing Project, which organizes human dignity groups throughout small-town and rural Oregon.

The Boston-based Pride Network is also weighing in on the gay and lesbian customer grab. According to Pride Network director Michele Frost, customers can choose any nonprofit group that serves the gay, lesbian or HIV communities and is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service. If 10 people pick the organization, it receives a check every quarter equaling 3 percent of the long-distance expenditures of all the people who selected the group. Non-allocated funds are divided evenly among the groups that are chosen by fewer than 10 people.

The Pride Network is a subsidiary of Trans National Communications, which is not gay-owned. "But all of the employees involved in the Pride Network are gay and lesbian, and same-sex family benefits are provided by Trans National. They are committed to gay and lesbian civil rights, and so are we," says Frost.

Frost adds that the Pride Network has distributed \$33,000 to 28 groups since it was founded last February. Esther's Pantry, the HIV Day Center, Klamath County AIDS/HIV Support Education Council, and the Lesbian Community Project are among the Oregon groups selected by Pride Network customers.



Working Assets staffers Sue Libow and Nick Allen (center) with No on 13's Brent Mower.

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