

# Honoring their own

Rural activists gather to exchange strategies and give kudos

by Inga Sorensen

Common vision and cooperation—those are the key ingredients to creating healthy and more inclusive communities, so says Marcy Westerling, director of the Rural Organizing Project, a grass-roots group that continues to assist dozens of local human dignity groups in striving toward that lofty goal.

"We're currently working on our 'Enough is Enough' campaign, which helps citizens collectively name problems facing their communities and offers specific strategies they can use to tackle those challenges," says Westerling.

Members of rural and small-town civil rights groups gathered March 18 to swap strategies and share do's and don'ts during the third annual Rural Caucus and Strategizing Session in Albany.

More than 60 such groups have sprung up during the past three years; the vast majority were formed in response to the Oregon Citizens Alliance's campaigns specifically targeting gay men and lesbians.

"There is currently a lot of anti-people sentiment out there," says Westerling. "It manifests itself through anti-gay campaigns, or anti-welfare or anti-affirmative action or anti-immigration campaigns. This creates a very negative and divisive atmosphere. We're trying to reverse that trend."

In addition to sharing ideas, participants in the strategizing session honored those whose ideas have made a difference. Some activists were given Grassroots Leadership awards from ROP which recognized their "outstanding work in eliminating intolerance in rural Oregon."



Marcy Westerling

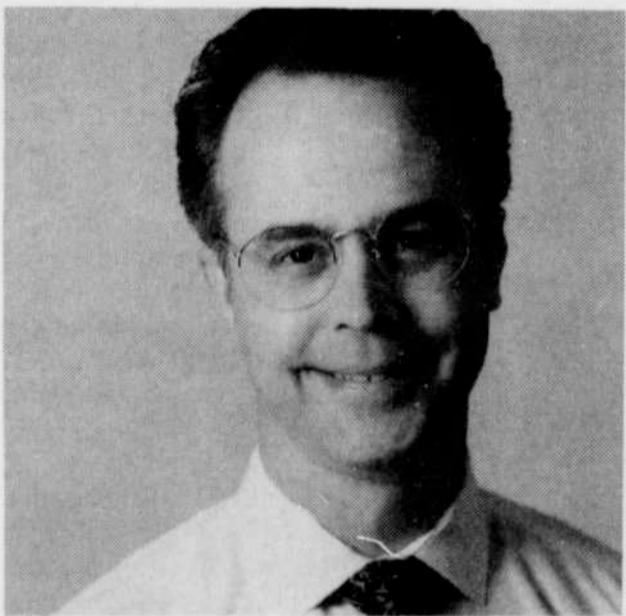
One award went to the West Valley Human Rights Coalition, a group operating in Polk and Yamhill counties. WVHRC hosted a series of exhibits including the Anne Frank Community Exhibit, a Women's History Exhibit, and a show exploring issues surrounding censorship. Those exhibits, says Westerling, helped to build bridges and foster community cohesion.

Josephine County Human Rights Alliance was also singled out for its human rights work. JCHRA produces a monthly newsletter designed to build understanding among community members, and it also hosted the Anne Frank Community Exhibit. Westerling says JCHRA, which has an excellent speakers' bureau, was instrumental in shaping productive responses to the Josephine County recruitment drive of the racist group Aryan Nation.

Hispañós Unidos, a human rights group in Lake County, also received an award for addressing the growing tide of anti-immigrant feelings in that region. The group, all the members of which are Latino/a, has established a scholarship fund for Latino/a youth, and it sponsors an annual Cinco de Mayo event to celebrate the culture of people of Mexican heritage.

"There's a lot of great work going on throughout Oregon," says Westerling. "But it can be very hard and tiring. We think it's very important to acknowledge each other's work and share strategies that people can use in their respective communities."

For more information, contact the Rural Organizing Project, PO Box 919, Scappoose, OR 97056, 543-3978.



Jim Moeller

## Running proud endorses Jim Moeller

Running Proud, a civic organization based in Olympia, Wash., is backing openly gay candidate Jim Moeller, who is making a bid for the Vancouver City Council.

The group, which encourages sexual minorities to run for elective office, is also providing campaign services to the 39-year-old Moeller. He is currently the only announced candidate for the seat being vacated by incumbent Royce Polard, who is running for mayor.

"I don't think I'll be unopposed for long,"

says Moeller, who is a chemical dependency counselor for Kaiser. "The filing deadline is July 31, so I expect others to jump into the race." If that's the case, Moeller could face a primary challenge in mid-September, followed by the November general election.

"It's been an interesting experience so far," says Moeller, who announced his political intentions last year. "Some people recently told me that I'm perceived as only a 'gay rights' candidate. Certainly that's important, but I'm also concerned about the economy, safe neighborhoods, and a whole host of other issues."

Moeller says he has spoken with openly gay Oregon state Rep. George Eighmey and openly gay Washington state Sen. Cal Anderson, about the problem of being perceived solely as a gay rights candidate.

"What they both told me was that you say 'Yes, I am gay, but I'm also concerned about this, and this, and this...' They told me that some people just are not going to support me because of who I am, but that many will as long as they realize I'm working on behalf of my entire community. It's good advice that I plan to follow," he says.

Moeller is involved in several civic activities, and he is a writer for the gay and lesbian publication *Vancouver Voice*. For more information, contact the Committee to Elect Jim Moeller, PO Box 5754, Vancouver, WA 98668-5754, (360) 693-0804. For more information about Running Proud, call or fax (360) 943-4662.

Inga Sorensen

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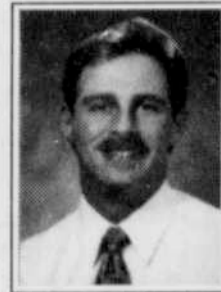
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# Bridgetown Realty

Red Lion Lloyd Center  
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**(503) 655-8015**