

## Tit for tat

A Seattle writer takes initiative in highlighting the unfairness of a discriminatory measure

by Inga Sorensen

As far as the movers and shakers of this country's political system are concerned, there's two types of people making up the majority of voters: the lazy and the crazy," writes William Steven Humphrey in the June 14 issue of *The Stranger*, an alternative Seattle newsweekly (similar to the Portland-based weekly *PDXS*). "The former group is typified by their dislike of the way our system is run, and just as determined to let someone else fix it. The latter is known for their willingness to stomp around in the freezing rain carrying signs, trying to palm dead fetuses to the President, even laying down their lives (or, preferably, someone else's) for their staunch belief in a single vague Bible verse or liberally interpreted constitutional amendment. Now, decide: *To which camp do you belong?*"

No longer content to be a member of Camp Lazy, Humphrey recently decided to give the crazies

a run for their money—while simultaneously highlighting the unfairness of an anti-gay initiative and, hopefully, compelling his "young, hip" readership to get more involved in the political arena. And he did so by using a potent blend of satire, the published word and the Northwest's easy-to-access initiative process. In June, Humphrey, a self-described heterosexual who originally hails from the Deep South (and a deeply religious background), filed an initiative in Washington that would bar state agencies

from placing children in the custody of anyone who "practices right-wing fundamentalist Christianity." The 33-year-old reporter filed the initiative as part of a *Stranger* story he was working on that described how the initiative process works.

"I decided to do a story about how to draft and file an initiative," explains the amiable Humphrey, an Alabama twang still quite discernible. "I also thought it was important to highlight in a satirical way just how discriminatory Initiative 167 is."

Initiative 167 is an anti-sexual-minority-rights initiative being pushed by the Citizens Alliance of Washington, a spin-off of the Oregon Citizens Alliance. That measure would restrict adoptions by gay men and lesbians. "All I did was substitute 'right-wing fundamentalist Christianity' in the places where 'homosexual' was," he says.

Humphrey's initiative defines people who practice "right-wing fundamentalist Christianity" as "any person who believes the Bible in its entirety is the unarguable word of God, and based upon their interpretations of biblical scripture places negative moral judgments on individuals of dissimilar beliefs or sexual orientation, applies their interpretations to form extreme political agendas, and willingly self-identifies with the aforementioned beliefs."

A flier accompanying one of the petitions urges citizens to "Stop the fundamentalist Christian right wing from adopting children [because] right wing fundamentalist Christians have a documented history of malicious mayhem; [they] actively recruit and deny their children the freedom of religious choice; and [they] pass their legacy of hatred down

to the next generation."

Humphrey says, "I say 'malicious mayhem' because the right wing urges people to harass abortion clinics, and as for recruiting, when's the last time a gay person came to your door at 8 am and tried to convert you?"

He adds, "I've had some straight people ask me why I feel the need to do this, and I tell them that this isn't just about gays and lesbians—this is about the right wing trying to restrict all people's rights except their own. We have to get involved so this doesn't happen."

Sam Woodard, the CAW's executive director, reportedly called Humphrey's initiative "a joke" which "couldn't hold up in any court of law [because] it is directly against the Constitution and freedom of religion."

Woodard won't, in fact, have to worry about a court challenge because Humphrey did not gather enough signatures by the July 7 deadline. Nevertheless, the journalist says his experiment has been quite a success.

"We filed the initiative on June 1, and we didn't get our ballot title and number until the end of June. We only had until July 7 to gather more than 181,000 signatures to get the initiative on the November 1996 ballot," he says. "With only one week to collect signatures, however, we gathered 5,000 signatures and received the support of more than 400 volunteers."

He adds, "This caught on like wildfire. I've gotten media inquiries from all across the country, from *Out* magazine to *The New York Times*. I've been on numerous radio talk shows. This has been a success because we've been able to show how hypocritical the right wing is—and we've done so to a national audience."

This isn't the first time satire has been used during an anti-gay campaign. In 1992 during Oregon's angry struggle over Ballot Measure 9, a group calling itself the Special Righteousness Committee (spoofing the name of the measure's sponsor, the No Special Rights Committee) filed an initiative petition that would have written all of the biblical Book of Leviticus into Oregon's Constitution, not just the proscription against homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22. The committee said Leviticus prohibited eating pork or shellfish, shaving, and wearing clothes made from more than one kind of material—in addition to homosexuality and adultery—and thus these practices should also be outlawed.

Like Humphrey, the Special Righteousness Committee failed to gather enough signatures but managed to draw attention to other people's attempts to make their personal morality into public policy.

What the two have also done is add fuel to the increasingly fiery debate over reforming the initiative process.

"Here in the Northwest, you can't swing a dead cat without smacking some wild-ass group writing a new loopy initiative, and it's easy to see why they enjoy it so much," writes Humphrey. "Filing an initiative is quite the easiest way of mainlining your crackpot idea into the vein of state government, and what's more, it drives the 'lazies' crazy!"



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