

PROFILE

# Educational outreach

*Grass-roots group continues catering to small towns and rural areas, teaching communities the skills they need to organize*

by Inga Sorensen

**L**ike many groups, Northwest Speak Out Project was born in response to Ballot Measure 9, an anti-sexual-minority initiative that Oregonians voted down in 1992.

In its earliest form, the project was the speakers' bureau for the No on 9 campaign; following the election, the group transformed into the Oregon Speak Out Project, an educational outreach program of Equity Foundation, which assisted residents statewide with human rights organizing. Today, NWSOP has its own independent nonprofit status and offers support to residents in a handful of western states who are organizing against anti-sexual-minority efforts.

"It's been great to watch this organization grow over the years. It's very satisfying to know that we're able to assist citizens throughout the region to organize and build stronger communities," says NWSOP co-founder Ed Reeves, a Portland attorney.

Though the structure and scope of the group has shifted over time, its goal remains steadfast: to provide support to citizens in communities across the land as they embark on human rights organizing. NWSOP does so by providing informational brochures and other educational materials, as well as speaker and leadership trainings.

During the months leading up to the Ballot Measure 9 election, Reeves and other project volunteers hosted workshops across Oregon, where they taught the average citizen (i.e., political novices) how to speak publicly about gay and lesbian issues and make an overall difference in their respective communities.

The group, then OSOP, distributed informational materials, which included sample letters to the editor, to instruct citizens how to frame the debate.

According to NWSOP co-chair Stephen Manning, the group currently distributes packets—usually via electronic mail—which address issues critical to the sexual minorities community (such as same-sex marriage) to citizens in Oregon, Idaho, Washington and Montana.

In January, NWSOP volunteers developed a new training manual and course, entitled "Training of Workshop Leaders," which teaches participants how to handle difficult individuals, facilitate adult learning, and tailor a message to an audience.

Working with gay- and lesbian-rights advocates in Montana, NWSOP held two-day workshops in Missoula and Billings in January and February. Another training set for March was postponed after a national uproar ensued when a Montana state lawmaker unsuccessfully introduced a bill that would have required individuals convicted under the state's "deviate sexual conduct law"—which prohibits consensual same-sex acts—to register for life with local law enforce-

ment officials.

"I think that incident really galvanized the community in Montana, and we certainly want to assist citizens as much as they need us to, says Manning. "I also want people to know that NWSOP only goes where we are invited. If activists in a community feel we have something to offer, then we'll go. We don't tread on people's toes."

That, in fact, is one of the major underpinnings of NWSOP's philosophy. During the Measure 9 campaign, the No on 9 coalition was widely viewed as a Portland-centric organization, which spawned dissension and resentment among many activists. OSOP's—and now NWSOP's—primary focus was to ensure that citizens in *small towns and rural areas* have the skills they need to organize within their own communities.

"We don't tell people what to do," says Manning.

A relatively new NWSOP feature is the Information Resource Team, which provides information related to sexual minorities to organizations throughout the Northwest that have historically been underserved. The four basic projects IRT offers are resource packets, indexed letters to the editor, a rapid response network, and an annotated bibliography.

The informational packets include statistical information, published studies, and newspaper and magazine articles relating to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. The packets are free and meant to be distributed, edited, replicated and shared with others by community-based organizations. NWSOP maintains a stock of more than 120 sample letters.

An IRT subcommittee, meanwhile, is putting together an annotated bibliography dealing with specific subgroups within the sexual minorities community (such as those based on color, class, disability and age) to be used as a reference tool.

According to Manning, NWSOP's rapid response network will assist community-based organizations when they call with questions regarding sexual minority issues.

"There are many exciting changes occurring with NWSOP," says Manning, who is an immigration counselor with the nonprofit service organization Immigration Counseling Service. "Though we cater to citizens in rural areas, we want everyone to know there's a place for them with this group."

Manning says NWSOP's annual budget is about \$60,000, and the group depends on grants and private donations for the bulk of its funding. He says donations are always appreciated. For more information, write to NWSOP at 921 SW Morrison St., Suite 506, Portland, OR 97205, or call 223-4992.

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