

So far, so good

Washington initiative effort fails; Oregon activist cautions:
 'This is no bellwether'

by Inga Sorensen

Patrick Hogan knows that tenacity can pay off.

And when your organization's over-all two-year-budget hovers at the \$10,000 mark, it's a good thing that dedication is to be found in abundance.

"We spent a lot of time and energy training volunteers who really cared about preserving people's civil rights. They were the heart of this effort," says Hogan of the Seattle-based Bigot Busters, a group which was formed to discourage voters from signing petitions for initiatives aimed at limiting citizens' basic human rights, specifically the rights of sexual minorities.

The "effort" Hogan is referring to is the failure of anti-gay-rights backers to gather enough signatures necessary to place two anti-gay initiatives before the 1996 Washington Legislature.

Initiative 166 would have prevented governments from granting civil rights protections based on sexual orientation. Initiative 167 would have limited adoption and foster parenting rights to married heterosexual couples.

A lack of voter interest and disorganization are cited as primary reasons initiative proponents were unable to collect the necessary 181,667 signatures by the Dec. 29 deadline. The work of Bigot Busters and other groups is also being touted as a factor.

"And I think people here are getting tired of this whole issue," says Hogan, who says the campaign seemed relatively low key. "It was not emotionally charged whatsoever. It was actually quite uneventful. People in Washington are pretty sophisticated."

Like their counterparts in Oregon, which has been bigot busting since the volatile Ballot Measure 9 campaign of 1991-92, Bigot Buster volunteers this year headed out to shopping malls and state fairs—"and lots of Costcos"—to pass out literature and encourage voters to "decline to sign."

It is a call many of the state's residents apparently heeded. In fact, it was the second consecutive year that anti-gay-rights proposals have failed to win widespread support in Washington.

Last year, two other anti-gay measures, initiatives 608 and 610, failed to get on the ballot due to a lack of signatures. This time anti-gay supporters tried to go through the Legislature rather than directly to the voters, partly because they had more time to collect signatures if they took the legislative route.

Gay-rights advocates have even more reason to

cheer: Washington state Rep. Val Stevens (R-Arlington), who was ready to push anti-gay bills similar to the initiatives, has backed off due to the short session and other priorities.

"I'm not going to pursue them this year," Stevens told *The Seattle Times*.

Another group being credited for its work is Hands Off Washington, which has reportedly spent \$1.5 million fighting the initiatives this year and last. During the past couple of years the group has helped form 26 coalitions in both urban and rural Washington. It also launched a pledge campaign



Julie Davis

that asked Washingtonians to sign a Northwest Pledge in which they agreed not to support anti-human-rights measures.

"I think the various groups have worked well together," says Kelly Evans, executive director of Hands Off Washington. "For instance, Bigot Busters focused on countering the petition signing, while we worked on different educational components and a lot of the press work.... We're very pleased."

Whether the success in Washington is a bellwether for Oregon—which is currently facing four statewide anti-gay-rights initiatives aimed at the November 1996 ballot—remains to be seen. Leading activists, how-

ever, think it isn't.

"Anti-gay-rights proponents in Washington state have never been able to gather enough signatures," says Julie Davis, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, the successor organization to the No on 13 campaign. "They have never built a base, which in turn leads to their inability to collect signatures. That has never been the case in Oregon, where the Oregon Citizens Alliance has a solid base and has proved time and time again that it can get an initiative on the ballot."

"The OCA has been successful since the [late 1980s]. This is not new to them," adds Marcy Westerling of the Rural Organizing Project, which assists human rights efforts in small-town and rural Oregon. "And I don't think it's a matter of people here being less sophisticated. I think it's that the OCA may be more sophisticated at crafting its strategy than other similar groups."

Both Davis and ROP's field network coordinator, Kelley Weigel, report that they have heard little about sightings of OCA-backers working to collect the necessary 97,000 signatures to the anti-gay

campaign was launched several months ago.

Davis, meanwhile, applauds Washington activists' success, and says the respective camps continue to share ideas and strategies. For example, Basic Rights Oregon, which unveiled its pledge campaign several months ago, shared the concept with Hands Off Washington, which embraced it.

"Activists in Oregon, Washington and Idaho all model off each other," says Davis. "For Hands Off Washington to be interested in the pledge idea was a reinforcement of what we are doing in Oregon."

Davis says her group has collected 6,000 pledges from Oregonians who vow to oppose all anti-gay-rights initiatives. Basic Rights Oregon is hoping to gather 200,000 such pledges, and is currently gearing up to raise nearly \$2 million for the campaign.

One of the organization's largest obstacles, however, remains the public's misperception that it is already illegal to discriminate against someone due to his or her sexual orientation.

To deal with that inaccurate yet widely held view, the group is creating a "Fair Workplace Project" video, which is designed to educate the public about what is and is not legal with respect to sexual orientation discrimination, particularly as it pertains to employment issues. Davis says production of the video is in the final stages and that it should be released soon.

She also says she'd like her group to eventually emulate Hands Off Washington's ability to "work the Legislature," rather than simply mobilizing Oregonians to vote no on an initiative.

With the I-166 and I-167 defeats under their belts, Washington lesbian- and gay-rights supporters have, in fact, turned their sights toward other measures likely to be considered by state lawmakers, who began their 1996 session on Jan. 8. A handful of anti-gay measures are expected to make an appearance.

Evans believes that her organization, along with the Seattle-based Privacy Fund, which is much like Oregon's Right to Privacy, will be able to counter that activity because their respective followings are savvy on issues involving the state Legislature.

"I think that has a lot to do with the fact that these initiatives were aimed at the Legislature anyway, so people really had to make themselves familiar with the system," she says. "I think that will greatly help when we are mobilizing the community around bills this session."

"Hands Off Washington is good at using their base-building to work the Legislature. They did last session and they'll do it again this session. We are still building our base here in Oregon," says Davis. "My hope is that we can come out of the 1996 elections and begin to take it to a more multilevel approach. You need all of the components working together. It takes more than a lobbyist and a bill. It takes the people."

Those wishing to contact Basic Rights Oregon may call 222-6151. To reach the Rural Organizing Project, call 543-3978.

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEINER

initiatives on the ballot.

"It seems very quiet out there," says Weigel. "We did expect to see some activity at the shopping malls during the holiday season, but we haven't heard of that happening. It could very well be that they have enough support that they don't have to utilize those very public venues anymore."

"I think we'll see a lot more activity in the next few months," adds Davis.

ROP continues to promote its "Enough is Enough" campaign, of which the centerpiece organizing tool is a postcard that urges Oregonians to uphold democratic principles and think twice before signing anti-human-rights petitions. Westerling estimates that 25,000 have been sent since the cam-

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