

A helping hand

The Human Rights Campaign changes tack to bring support to the state-level struggle for civil rights

by Inga Sorensen

It can be described as a learning experience for all of those involved. At least that's the way Daniel Zingale, political director for the national Human Rights Campaign, sees it.

"For many years HRC worked nearly exclusively on ensuring that the views of gays and lesbians were represented in Congress," says Zingale, whose Washington, D.C.-based organization works toward gay and lesbian equality. "We certainly continue to do that, but things have changed largely due to that first round of anti-gay initiatives—specifically Oregon's Measure 9 and Colorado's Amendment 2."

HRC officials will be the first to admit that relatively few dollars and little guidance were directed to either of those 1992 campaigns. Instead, HRC was still nearly exclusively focusing on lobbying federal lawmakers on AIDS and gay issues—the group's primary task since it was established in 1980.

"Statewide organizations really had to fend for themselves," says Zingale. "In Oregon, they were successful. In Colorado, they obviously weren't."

The force of both anti-gay-rights campaigns stunned many, prompting organizations at all levels to rethink how they did business.

When Oregon voters were asked in 1994 to cast a ballot on Measure 13, a watered-down version of Measure 9, HRC dispatched trained campaign workers to the state and dumped an estimated \$136,000 into the No on 13 effort—a hugely different response than the one two years earlier.

The organization similarly became involved in other states where anti-gay initiatives were being pushed.

"I think there was a realization that what happens at the state level does in fact impact what happens inside the Beltway," says Julie Davis, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, the successor organization to the No on 13 campaign (which Davis managed). "It was becoming obvious that if voters were passing statewide anti-gay initiatives, there was little chance a federal civil rights bill would pass."

With other statewide anti-gay initiatives poised for Oregon's November ballot, HRC again expects to raise and contribute funds to defeat the measure(s) and send in staffers with substantial campaign experience.

"We view our relationship with Oregon as a partnership. There clearly is an abundance of expertise already there," says Zingale. "What we do is ask, 'What do you need from us?'"

"That was certainly our experience during Measure 13," adds Davis. "In 1994 what we needed most was financial resources and staff. That's exactly what HRC gave us.... I think HRC has done a good job trying to be sensitive to our

needs."

Zingale says HRC is currently involved in developing campaign messages. He says his organization has been conducting focus groups to find out what language is most effective with respect to gay rights campaigns.

For example, Zingale says recent data indicate the phrase "religious right" is less effective than its use among activists would indicate.

"People seem to associate that terminology with the rights of a person to express his or her religious views," he explains. "'Radical right' has been pretty effective—but in light of the Oklahoma City bombing, people seem more likely to associate the term 'radical' with blowing up buildings."

He says, "The phrase 'religious, political extremists' seems to strike a chord, probably because it links religion with political activism and extremism. I think you're going to hear that phrase a lot more."

"I think here in Oregon we probably struggle with the problem of terminology less than other places," says Davis. "All you pretty much have to say here is 'OCA' and it says it all."

In addition to working on initiative campaigns, HRC plans to be involved in the race to fill the seat of outgoing U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield, as well as in more than 150 other congressional races in 40 states.

In the recent special election to replace former Sen. Bob Packwood, HRC contracted with local political professional Jean Harris, who worked full time to mobilize more than 200 HRC volunteers to staff phone banks and distribute literature for Democrat Ron Wyden's campaign. According to Zingale, there are 1,400 HRC members in Oregon.

HRC's political action committee also contributed \$10,000 to Wyden's campaign, the maximum allowed by law, plus \$5,000 to the Oregon Democratic Party, and \$5,000 to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

As you undoubtedly know by now, Wyden—who supports gay and lesbian civil rights and same-sex marriage—defeated his opponent, the anti-gay-rights Republican Gordon Smith, by a slim margin.

One other Oregon/HRC connection worth noting revolves around former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts, a longtime friend of the gay and lesbian community. Roberts, who left office in 1994, currently works for Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and sits on HRC's board of directors.

"She is one of our most active board members," says Zingale. "She has already risen to co-chair of our public policy committee, a very prestigious committee. Barbara is a doer, and yet she's friendly and accessible. We love her."



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

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—Julie Davis

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