

Log Cabin fever

The Oregon gay and lesbian Republican group is on a roll with a Pink Elephant dinner and a push for new members

by Inga Sorensen

It was nearly two decades ago when Kevin Wadsworth helped launch Concerned Citizens for Individual Rights, a San Francisco group for gay and lesbian Republicans.

"The group was founded in 1978. It was the predecessor to Log Cabin Republicans. Who ever thought this little San Francisco group would blossom into the national organization that Log Cabin is today?" laughs Wadsworth, 48, Log Cabin's newly elected western regional director.

With an estimated 10,000 members, Log Cabin has 54 chapters in 36 states. The group strives to educate the Republican Party on issues of concern to gay men and lesbians.

"Believe it or not, one of those who helped get Concerned Citizens off the ground was Harvey Milk, whom I happen to share a birthday with, May 22. Harvey was strongly partisan in favor of Democrats, but he understood the importance of having an established gay presence in both parties, and it was something he wanted to support," says Wadsworth, who traveled from his home near Sacramento to partake in Oregon Log Cabin Republicans' Pink Elephant Dinner, held Sept. 15 in Portland. The group hopes to make the dinner an annual event.

Generating support, sharing history and establishing a new Oregon tradition were among the goals of the dinner, says Jerry Keene, a Portland attorney and Oregon Log Cabin's president.

According to Keene, 24 people—23 of whom were men, and nearly all European Americans—turned out for the fledgling event.

The featured speaker was Oregon Labor Commissioner Jack Roberts, and an award was presented in honor of state schools superintendent of public instruction Norma Paulus, a former Republican state legislator and longtime supporter of anti-discrimination legislation.

"This was a celebration for us," says Keene. "I think when Right to Privacy held its first dinner many years ago, only a handful of people showed up. You have to start somewhere."

Keene says Oregon Log Cabin has a mailing list of "about 45," but he estimates that between 15 and 20 active members participate in the group's monthly meetings.

"I think a couple of years ago, people associated Oregon Log Cabin with maybe two or three people, who pretty much made political statements," he says. "We're trying to go in a different direction and really focus on developing our organization and get more members throughout the state."

Keene was among a group of Log Cabin members who attended the Republican National Convention held in San Diego in August. That convention began the day after the closing of the Log Cabin convention, which was held in the same city from Aug. 9 to 11.

"A group of about 30 or 40 of us went to the Republican Convention wearing our 'Big Tent' buttons. We went up to everyone we could and let them know who we were and why we were there. I even went up to [Christian Coalition honcho] Ralph Reed and introduced myself," Keene says. "He seemed shocked at first, but then shook my hand."

According to Wadsworth, delegates at the Log Cabin convention held a vigorous debate over whether to endorse the GOP nominee, Bob Dole.

The organization declined to endorse GOP nominee George Bush in 1992 because of his campaign's anti-gay overtones. After the Dole campaign publicly said it would welcome Log Cabin's endorsement, delegates voted to back Dole by a 3-to-1 margin—even though the relationship between Dole and Log Cabin has been a touchy one.

Last year the Dole campaign solicited and received a \$1,000 donation from Log Cabin. The campaign then returned the money when news of the donation became public. Dole agreed with that decision, but later said it was a mistake.

Despite the snag, Log Cabin officials describe Dole as a moderate. They say when he served in the Senate he implemented a nondiscrimination policy in his office which covered sexual orientation. The group also says Dole has a solid record on AIDS issues.

Detractors, meanwhile, say Dole has a long record of opposing equal rights. They say he has voted to "prevent schools from promoting homosexuality," opposed lifting the military ban on gay and lesbian service members, supported Clarence Thomas for the U.S. Supreme Court, opposed Roberta Achtenberg's nomination to a high level Housing and Urban Development post, and supported restrictions on AIDS prevention programs aimed at youth.

"If we think we have a genuine opportunity to make a difference in a campaign or administration, then we will try," says an undaunted Keene.

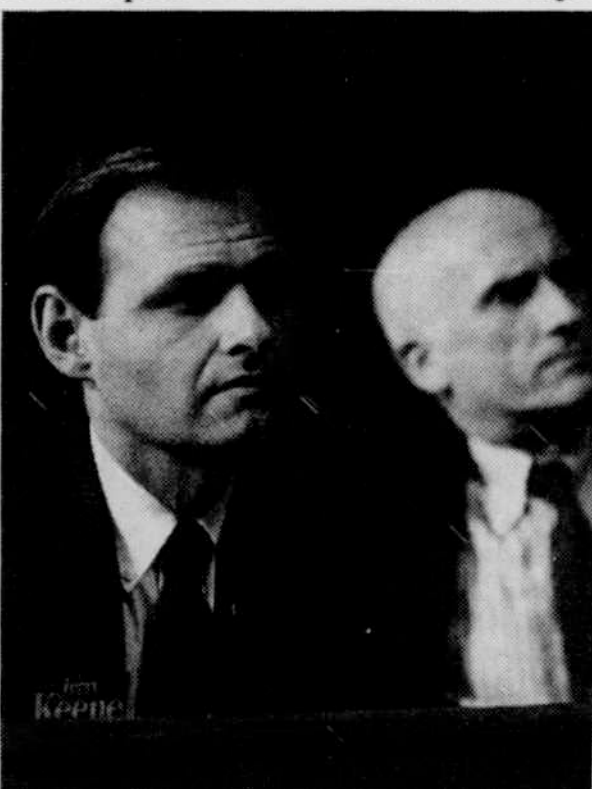
In addition to endorsing Dole, Log Cabin recently issued a letter to all Republican U.S. senators (prior to the vote on the Defense of Marriage Act) in which the group denounced the bill, describing it as unconstitutional and a form of "gay-bashing."

"People may not always understand us, but we do stand by our bottom-line principles," says Keene. He adds, "At the same time, we realize that change doesn't happen overnight. It took gay activists years and years to make those same changes within the Democratic Party. We too can be an influence within the Republican Party. Leaving the party is not the answer."

Speaking of influencing the GOP, Keene says he has spoken a couple of times with Republican U.S. Senate candidate Gordon Smith about the position Smith would have taken on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, federal legislation that would have, in some cases, prohibited employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Senate recently defeated the bill by a 50-49 vote.

Smith accepted the Oregon Citizens Alliance endorsement during a previous Senate bid. He is also on record as opposing human rights protections based on sexual orientation.

"He has said to me that ENDA seemed like a moderate piece of legislation," says Keene. "We are pushing him to make a statement on what position he would have taken."



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