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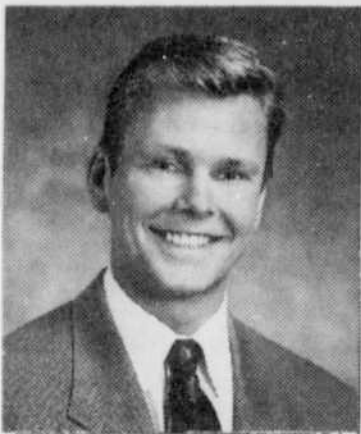
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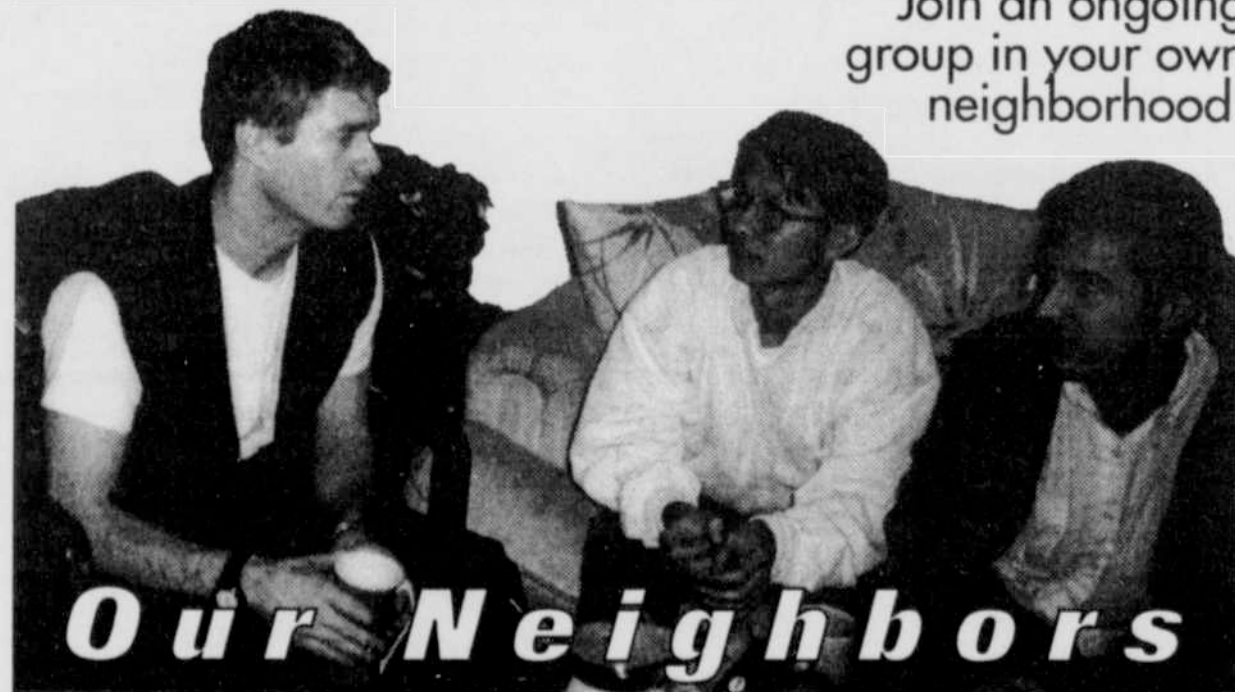
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local news

Not fade away

Mabon is back from the ashes with a measure that would define "family" in the Oregon Constitution

by Inga Sorensen

Call it a pound of the old with a pinch of the new.

"This is basically the same language as Measure 13 and to a lesser degree Measure 9," says Jean Harris, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide grass-roots organization whose purpose in part is to counter discriminatory ballot measures.

Harris is referring to a proposed initiative being brought by Lon Mabon, head of the Oregon Citizens Alliance.

On March 27, the Oregon Supreme Court certified a modified ballot title for the proposed initiative that would amend a section of the Oregon Constitution that relates to freedom of religious opinion.

The ballot title reads: "Amends Constitution: Defines and Limits Concept of 'Family,' Specifies Effects."

A "yes" vote would establish limits on the concept "family" to couples that include a man and woman. A "no" vote would leave the Oregon Constitution without limits on the "family" concept.

The summary reads: "Amends Constitution. Limits families governments may approve to man and woman, children, if any, survivors. Unmarried

parents including semen donors, are family responsible for their children unless court orders otherwise. Governments cannot recognize sex changes. Governments cannot deny other constitutional rights, or licenses, benefits, services under existing statutes. Public employees' private lawful sexual behavior treated as non-job related unless that treatment violates measure's limit on government approval of family. Measure's authority over public libraries subject to local standards established through review process."

OCA backers, you no doubt recall, gathered enough signatures to place statewide anti-gay-rights initiatives on the ballot in 1992 and 1994. Neither passed at the ballot box.

The previous measures touched several points including censorship issues and the governmental prohibition against granting legal protections based on sexual orientation. Ballot Measure 9 was viewed by some as the wildest version, containing phrases like "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse," and "bestiality, pedophilia and necrophilia."

"This is the same anti-gay smorgasbord we've seen before. It has the book-burning part and the denial of domestic partner benefits. It mentions sex changes. All Lon has done this time is tack on the gay marriage issue," says Harris, whose group will likely play a key role in countering Mabon's latest campaign.

Though the latest proposal does not mention marriage explicitly, it does appear to undermine any move toward that end.

"If Lon Mabon should succeed with this initiative, many different types of families would no longer be recognized, not just gays and lesbians," says Bonnie Tinker, executive director of Love Makes a Family Inc., a Portland-based group that promotes the rights and visibility of gay and lesbian families.

Though she says she's concerned over the measure, Tinker says it's par for the course.

"I remember debating [OCA staffer] Scott Lively in 1992 during the Measure 9 campaign," she recounts.

According to Tinker, Lively presented the standard OCA line about the potential perils to children who are raised by same-sex couples (i.e., that children need to be raised by a man and woman to be well-adjusted).

"After he made these kinds of remarks, a woman in the audience asked Lively if he was going to come after her next because she was a single mother," Tinker says, adding that the question was not far-fetched given the new initiative's attempt to narrowly define family.

"If you look at the positive side, it's encouraging that we're seeing more framing of gay issues as family issues," she says.

What's also encouraging, adds Barry Pack, executive director of Right to Pride, a statewide gay, lesbian and bisexual rights group, is that the initiative seems to stretch over a number of issues rather than being a clean, clear-cut proposal.

"The good news about this initiative is that it has a lot of weird stuff in it. Many people will be turned off by that," says Pack, whose group is battling anti-gay-marriage legislation currently wending its way through

the Oregon Legislature.

Those bills—Senate Bill 577 and Senate Joint Resolution 17—seek to limit marriage to heterosexual couples and bar recognition in Oregon of same-gender marriages performed elsewhere. Both bills are sponsored by Sen. Marilyn Shannon, a conservative Salem-area Republican.

The latter includes a referendum clause, meaning that if approved by lawmakers it would circumvent a gubernatorial veto and go directly to the people for a vote during the November 1998 general election.

"Shannon's referral is very direct and clean, and therefore very dangerous," says Pack. "Luckily the OCA measures are always vague and misleading. The same is true this time, which works in our favor."

Then there's the issue of Lon Mabon himself. Numerous accounts of late have spotlighted the OCA's dwindling membership and lackluster fund raising, as well as discontent aimed at Mabon (and his power-hungry antics) by a handful of ultraconservative Republicans who previously aligned themselves with the OCA.

In 1996 Mabon and company failed to gather enough signatures even to get their anti-gay-rights or anti-abortion-rights proposals on the ballot, leading some to speculate that the OCA was on the outs.

That same year, Mabon, who ran for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Sen. Mark Hatfield, was trounced in the Republican primary.

"Lon Mabon has taken a big beating," says Pack. "When people hear his name they are automatically turned off."

At the same time, Pack admits gay men and lesbians are extremely vulnerable when it comes to family issues.

"Maybe things are getting a little better, but

Continued on next page

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