

KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Whether she's eating fire or building coalitions, Nerissa Ediza brings passion to her social justice work by Holly Pruett

Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire.

So when Basic Rights Oregon, a grass-roots group that promotes gay and lesbian rights, decided to go on the offensive, it hired fire-eating Nerissa Ediza to do the job.

The 25-year-old Lesbian Avenger, who likes nothing better than teaching women how to eat fire—yes, literally—hopes to ignite Oregonians' passion for justice in the months ahead.

As BRO's new volunteer and field coordinator, Ediza is working to link the queer community and its supporters around Oregon with every other state in the nation through the Equality Begins at Home campaign.

A counterpart to the controversial Millennium March—a national queer march planned for Washington, D.C., in 2000—the Equality Begins at Home campaign emphasizes coordinated actions in state capitals around the country. The effort is sponsored by the Federation of Statewide Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Organizations.

As a member of the federation, BRO got a \$5,000 grant from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force to defray local organizing costs.

"I'm hearing a lot of people get excited about taking action on the state level and in their own communities," Ediza says. "Many folks can't get to Washington, D.C."

She envisions a series of activities that will function as a "morale-raiser" while advancing equal rights for Oregon's sexual minority communities. The effort will most likely culminate in a major demonstration in the state's capital city of Salem on March 21, 1999.

Ediza knows the event will only be as successful as the broad base of people it involves. For that reason, she cautions, "I'm the coordinator but I'm not deciding what it will look like."

Instead, Ediza is organizing meetings around the state. The first was held Nov. 30 in Portland. Meetings in Coos Bay, the Ashland area, Eugene, Bend and Salem are to follow.

With the help of the Rural Organizing Project, she's also connecting with activists in communities like La Grande, Astoria, Baker and Corvallis.

These conversations, along with a volunteer steering committee, will shape the campaign's strategies. Ideas that have already surfaced include citizen lobbying—which brings together legislators with their queer constituents and

straight allies—and a meeting with elected officials led by queer youth.

With another Oregon Citizens Alliance initiative filed for the November 2000 ballot, Ediza hopes the Equality Begins at Home campaign will both re-energize BRO's base of 80,000 supporters statewide and strengthen the dozens of local groups that participate in the project.

"We're interested in seeing local groups sup-

began volunteering at Clackamas Women's Services, a battered women's shelter. It was "a radicalizing experience," and Ediza came out as bisexual.

With her girlfriend still in the closet, Ediza initially had a hard time connecting with the queer scene in Portland. Looking for a larger community, she moved to San Francisco and found the Lesbian Avengers.

On a more serious note, she says her activism has given her "community, friends and support for being who I am."

While her parents are supportive of her bisexual identity and her work, Ediza still encounters vestiges of biphobia in the queer community.

"I overhear comments all the time," she says, but at the same time she feels it's easier to be out and bi than in it was in the past. She is particularly excited by "the growing connection between the bi and trans communities."

Making connections is at the heart of Ediza's approach to her job with BRO. If anybody is surprised that a Lesbian Avenger would be found doing the lobbying and electoral work typically considered more mainstream, Ediza believes each approach can inform the other.

As for the anticipated March 21 demonstration in Salem, Ediza says, "The best way to make sure it's not just a slick, over-processed media event is to make sure that lots of people get involved, so it comes directly from the community."

Ediza invites interested individuals to join the Equality Begins at Home steering committee, and would like to see supportive organizations get involved

in the plan to bring van loads of people to Oregon's capital.

Her dream? To wake up March 22 and see newspaper headlines proclaiming "50,000 Lobby for Queer Rights in Salem."

■ The EQUALITY BEGINS AT HOME STEERING COMMITTEE meets each Thursday at 7 p.m. at the BRO office, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. in Portland. All are welcome to participate on a one-time or ongoing basis. To learn more about the campaign or to receive the schedule of statewide meetings, call Ediza at 222-6151 or e-mail her at bronerissa@aol.com.



Nerissa Ediza

ported, not sucked dry," Ediza notes. "All organizations want to build their base in their local communities. It's the only way we'll out-organize the OCA."

Ediza also hopes the campaign will connect activists around the state and improve communication among queer and progressive groups.

To achieve these goals, Ediza knows the work has to be fun. It's a lesson she learned through her work with the Lesbian Avengers, a group that employs humor, theatrics and flamboyance in its efforts to create social change.

A Eugene native, Ediza moved to Portland after graduating from Whitman College, and

She soon moved back to Portland full of verve. Working as a temp gave her the time to devote to the then-tiny Lesbian Avengers chapter, which has since grown through the annual Dyke March, its "Lick Homophobia" lollipop campaign aimed at Portland-area schools, and counterdemonstrations targeting Christian right-wing activities.

Ediza is also involved in other progressive organizations, including Planned Parenthood, Bradley-Angle House, and Sisters in Portland Impacting Real Issues Together.

"Sometimes my friends and I joke that our social events are all meetings," she laughs.

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