



Right to Pride scored a major victory when the House passed the Oregon Employment Non-Discrimination Act in April 1997. Above, supporters of the act wait nervously for the vote

A PAST TO BE PROUD OF

Just Out looks back at the legacy of Right to Pride by Pat Young

The Portland Town Council, which began in the 1970s, lobbied the Oregon Legislature for gay rights, endorsed political candidates and educated the public about gay issues. That may sound like Right to Pride, but there's a major difference: Right to Pride took fund raising for gay and lesbian rights to a new level.

The founders of Right to Pride, initially named Right to Privacy, were convinced that it was possible to raise thousands of dollars instead of hundreds. They thought the best way to do that was to start a new organization. So, Portland-area activists John Baker, Terry Bean, Keeston Lowery, Dana Weinstein and Jerry Weller—all members of the Portland Town Council—left that organization and formed Right to Privacy PAC in 1982.

At the time, a constitutional right to privacy was an important issue in gay and lesbian politics, so the founders selected the name Right to Privacy. By the 1990s, however, political issues had grown beyond privacy toward equal civil rights. In the fall of 1996, the name was changed to Right to Pride.

RTP's first official fund-raising event was the Lucille Hart Dinner, held Oct. 9, 1982. A few activists wondered if the dinner, much less RTP, would be a success—especially when they heard about the price of a ticket.

"At the time, they thought we were crazy to charge fifty bucks and have it in an open place at the Benson," notes Bean, a well-known fundraiser. "But we did, and over 300 came."

Organizers raised more than \$17,000 and hailed the dinner as a success.

Within four years, RTP had fine-tuned its fund-raising skills. For instance, the group raised \$22,000 to support candidates in the May 1988 primary. Portland Mayor Bud Clark received \$7,000, the second largest donation to his reelection campaign.

Later that year, RTP grossed more than \$50,000 at the Lucille Hart Dinner. The money went to supportive candidates and the fight against Measure 8, a statewide initiative that sought to repeal Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's executive order barring discrimination based on sexual orientation in state government hiring and operations.

As attendance at the dinner continued to rise, so did the price of a ticket. By 1992, 1,000-plus people attended the \$100-per-plate shindig.

Political activists no longer doubted RTP's ability to raise funds. In April 1994, *The Oregonian* reported that at least one Republican lobbyist considered RTP to be a major financial player in Oregon politics.

Both GOP and Democratic politicians reportedly viewed "gay money as a prize." And what a prize—during the 1994 campaigns, RTP planned to distribute \$100,000. According to *The Oregonian*, candidates were clamoring for the questionnaire that RTP used to determine endorsements and donations.

Meanwhile, the Lucille Hart Dinner was significant not just for the money it raised, but also for its program. When Goldschmidt addressed the gathering in 1987, he was thought by some to be the first governor in the country to attend such a gay and lesbian political event.

For politicians supported by RTP, attending the dinner became a must. Their numbers increased each year as a testament to the growing support for gay rights; it was also an acknowledgment of the gay community's plumbing political clout.

The dinner was also a time for RTP to honor those who demonstrated an outstanding commitment to equal rights with the Lucille Hart Award.

The award was named after Alberta Lucille Hart, who was born in 1890. When she became a doctor and practiced medicine in Oregon, she dressed like a man, went by the name of Alan Lucille Hart, and married a woman. RTP considered her a lesbian and admired her courage. In 1996, some trans advocates challenged the assumption that Lucille Hart was a lesbian, so the name of the award was changed to the Right to Pride Award.

Winners of the honor (by any name) included Gretchen Kafoury, Vera Katz, Darcelle XV, Bill and Ann Shepherd, Holly Hart, Stevie Remington, Portland Gay Men's Chorus and Basic Rights Oregon.

Starting in 1992, RTP created the Sanford Director Award, which specifically recognized gay men, lesbians and bisexuals who provided outstanding leadership in the fight for equal rights. Winners included Terry Bean, Nancy Gallagher, Marcy Westerling, Gail Shibley, Jerry Weller, Elli Work and George Eighmey.

The RTP endorsement selection was a careful process. Candidates had to support equal rights protection for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals; women's rights; reproductive rights;

and AIDS funding and education. RTP knew it needed broad-based support, so it endorsed Republicans as well as Democrats—though overwhelmingly Democrats—and nongay candidates in addition to queer candidates.

Strong support from RTP also helped convince the Multnomah County commissioners to appoint George Eighmey, a gay man from Southeast Portland, as state representative for District 12 in the early 1990s. During his years in office, RTP consistently endorsed Eighmey.

"It not only meant that you were endorsed by an organization that had influence," explains Eighmey, "but it was a point of pride to say the ideals professed by RTP were part of my ideals as well."

Eventually, lobbying for gay rights became as important as fund raising. In 1989, RTP Inc. was formed to take on the educational and lobbying effort, while RTP's political action committee remained focused on raising money. In the early 1990s, RTP hired a professional lobbying firm.

In 1995, the Oregon Legislature reflected the national mood of sending conservative Republicans to office. While some felt that securing gay rights via the Legislature was a lost cause, RTP remained steadfast.

Undaunted, RTP held its first legislative reception inside the Capitol and continued to lobby throughout the year, laying the groundwork for the next session.

The effort paid off. During the 1997 session, the House passed House Bill 3719, which banned discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation. The bill failed in the Senate, but the vote in the House was considered a major victory.

State Reps. Chuck Carpenter, a gay Republican, and Eighmey, along with RTP and other allies, engaged in intense negotiations to get the bill before the House for a vote.

That session, RTP also contributed to the effort of defeating a bill that would have banned same-sex marriages. The bill passed in the state Senate, but failed in the House.

When conservative Republicans tried to place the issue on the primary ballot, opponents worked extra hard to avoid a public vote.

"By keeping this issue off the ballot, I believe we discouraged an onslaught of greater conservatism in the Legislature, which would have had far-reaching implications during the 1999 session," wrote Barry Pack, RTP's executive director, in a December 1997 newsletter.

Over the years, RTP promoted gay issues via support for Gail Shibley's appointment to the state House in 1991, as well as passage of a 1991 Portland ordinance barring sexual orientation discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations. The organization worked vigorously against anti-gay measures 9 in 1992 and 13 in 1994. In the early 1990s, it helped elect enough queer lawmakers—Kate Brown, George Eighmey, Hedy Rijken, Gail Shibley, Chuck Carpenter and Cynthia Wooten—to lead to the creation of Oregon's gay, lesbian and bisexual caucus.

Reflecting on RTP's legacy, founding member John Baker says: "If you pick a little part of the world to do something for the greater good, and if you can do some part of it well, then maybe that's all that really matters."

THE DISSOLUTION SOLUTION

"We'll be domestic partners," laughs Paige Richardson, chair of the Right to Pride board, while sitting next to Jean Harris, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon.

The two clink their tea cups together, toasting a coupling that has been in the works for the past year.

"We feel we'll be stronger together than separate," says Richardson, who is talking about the pending dissolution of RTP—a 17-year-old organization that for many years was recognized as Oregon's leading gay political group.

By summer's end—once the legal paperwork is cleared—RTP will officially be kaput. Some of its board members—like Richardson—will join BRO's board, or serve on BRO's political strategy committee working on candidate endorsements and related issues.

BRO has agreed to retire RTP's roughly \$10,000 debt, and in return will receive RTP's



Paige Richardson (left) and Jean Harris

voter and fund-raising information, and garner the rights to RTP's two major fund-raising events—the annual dinner held in October, and the summer garden party.

Richardson notes that changing political realities in Oregon precipitated the move.

"In the early days, the work was pretty much in the Legislature," she says, adding that it was more suited to RTP, which specialized in candidate endorsements, fund raising and, later, lobbying.

The emphasis began to shift, however, when the Oregon Citizens Alliance launched a series of statewide and local anti-gay ballot initiative campaigns earlier this decade. The initiatives needed to be countered via a grass-roots effort—through groups like No on 9 and No on 13, which later became Support Our Communities Political Action Committee and, finally, Basic Rights Oregon, which now claims more than 80,000 donors and volunteers.

What BRO brings to the marriage of the two organizations is its access to thousands of folks who can be mobilized. BRO has already delved into candidate endorsements and lobbying the Legislature, and is poised to handle many facets of the gay rights struggle, rather than just one.

"I think with the organizations joining, it will be less confusing for the average person," says Harris.

■ Reported by INGA SORENSEN