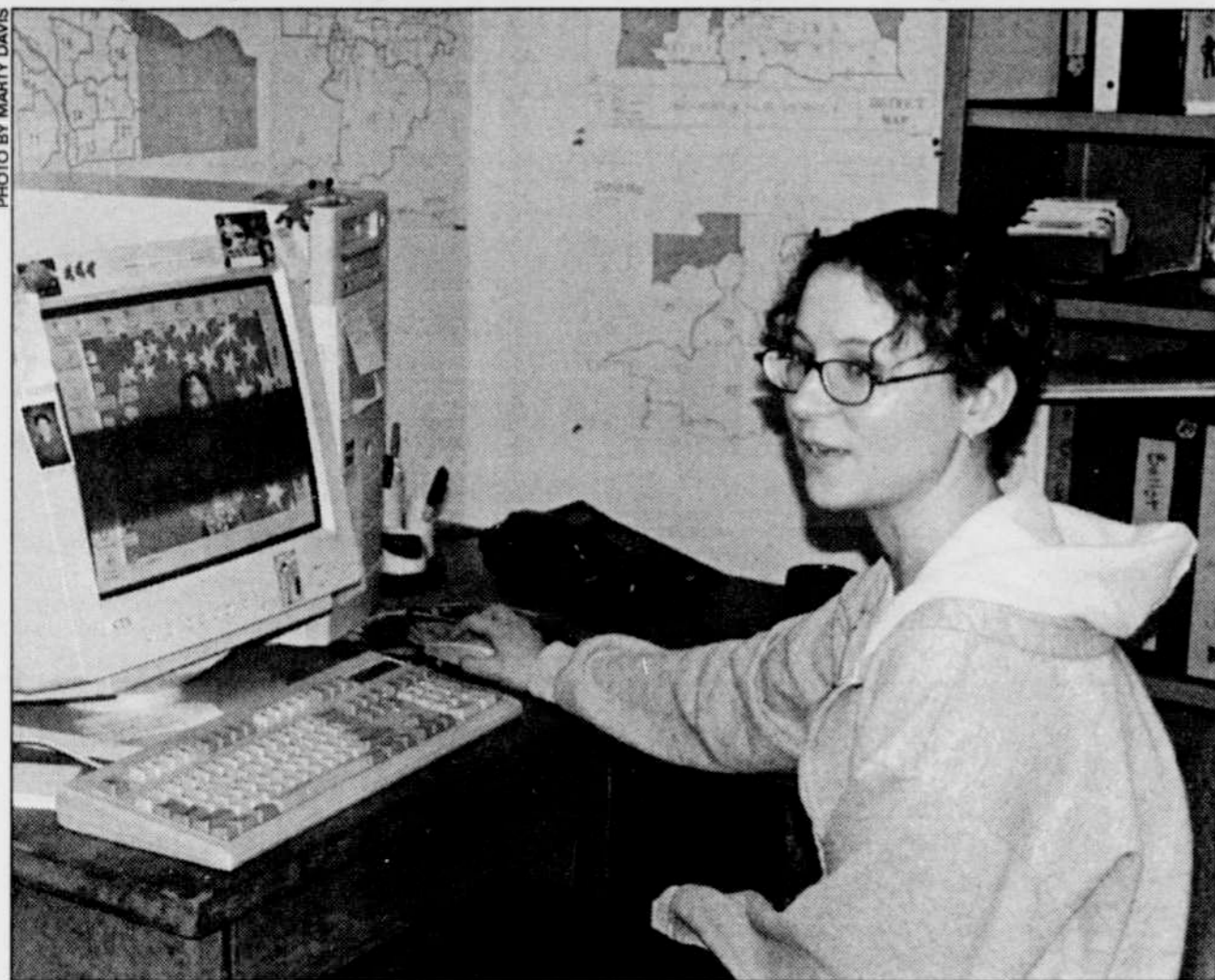


Basic Rights Oregon field organizer Nerissa Ediza is among those creating an activists' alliance



POLITICAL POTPOURRI

Basic Rights Oregon strives to build a network; U.S. census raises questions for queers by Inga Sorensen

If Basic Rights Oregon has its way, the state will soon have a highly organized activist network with goals and objectives and a year-round presence.

BRO, Oregon's largest lesbian and gay political organization, has been in touch with roughly 300 activists statewide to see whether those folks are interested in participating in the network, which will be composed of Area Action Teams throughout Oregon.

The teams will fall under BRO's purview and will be committed to lesbian and gay rights in general. They will, however, set goals relevant to their particular locales.

"This is about developing local leadership," explains Maura Roche, BRO's government relations consultant. "There are a lot of activists already out there, but we just want to try and formalize this."

Of the 300 activists being contacted, Roche figures about 100 will undergo an interview process with BRO to assess each person's level of interest. That group will be further whittled down to about 35 people who will be invited to be part of one of the teams and undergo an Advanced Leadership Training sponsored by BRO in conjunction with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

The training is described as nonpartisan and intensive, and highly participatory for queer leaders and allies who wish to understand and lead electoral campaigns. It is designed especially for community leaders who are preparing to take roles in ballot measure campaigns.

Participants will in part address how to mobilize the sexual minorities community while reaching out to the public at large, how to promote partnerships in the fight against discrimination, how make the best use of volunteers, and how to win over undecided voters.

The training is slated for April 27 through 31—which conflicts with the Millennium March, a national queer rights march on April 30 in Washington, D.C. Roche says the trainers, whom she had hoped would be available earlier in the month, were not free until those days.

Leadership trainees, meanwhile, will be expected to put their training to use this year

either by identifying 200 gay and pro-gay voters or by recruiting 20 volunteers and two volunteer leaders.

"We have an [Oregon Citizens Alliance] ballot measure to deal with right away," notes BRO field organizer Nerissa Ediza, who is heavily involved in developing the Area Action Teams network. "Having teams of people in local areas will really help, because they know more about the various pockets of support within their own communities than we do here in Portland."

And if, during the next legislative session, an anti-gay-rights measure is floated, the teams can mobilize constituents within their respective districts to lobby lawmakers.

"There are endless opportunities to utilize this framework," Ediza says.

■ *Potential participants in the ADVANCED LEADERSHIP TRAINING must call Basic Rights Oregon at (503) 222-6151 prior to March 25 to schedule an interview. Tuition is \$100; a limited number of sliding-scale scholarships are available based on need.*

ARE YOU DOWN FOR THE COUNT?

Census 2000 is upon us, and queers in the Northwest and across the country are contemplating how to respond to the federal government's decennial survey, which includes dozens of categories designed to garner a detailed picture of the country's demographics.

The census forms are being mailed to every household in the United States in March and April.

"Gay" is not among the categories a person can check to describe him- or herself, though there is a category for "unmarried partner," which includes unmarried same-sex or heterosexual couples—with or without children—who live in the same household. To date, the Census Bureau has not included a question about sexual orientation.

Earlier this month, the Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies and the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force launched a national campaign encouraging

same-sex couples living in the same household to mark the "unmarried partner" option when asked to describe their relationships.

"All public policy flows from the U.S. census," says NGLTF's Paula Ettlbrick. "If we are not counted, we lose out on federal funding for research, funding for community services, and passage and implementation of laws that benefit our community. We also sacrifice important opportunities for more equitable political representation of our community."

She adds: "While legislation in states like Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts has moved in our favor, we are seeing a definite backlash to our efforts through passage of laws blocking marriage and adoption in other states like Utah, California and Arkansas. The census count will allow us to break through the rhetoric and show dispassionately that hundreds of thousands of same-sex couples already share committed relationships and are raising children. These families need the same resources and recognition as any other family."

But a March 7 article in the *Los Angeles Times* highlights the ambivalence some gay people have about the lack of an explicit category for them.

The piece quotes Martin McCombs, execu-

tive director of the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Greater Long Beach, who said he and others will protest the exclusion by creating their own demographic category on the form, writing in that they are gay. (Unsolicited responses will be disregarded, the *Times* reports.)

Basic Rights Oregon's Maura Roche tells *Just Out*: "[BRO] hasn't had a formal discussion about this, but I know from a political standpoint it's important to be counted, because census data is used for political redistricting."

But clearly, frustration exists.

"We're talking about the ultimate undercount. You are not even on the list," lamented former Portlander Gwenn Baldwin, now executive director of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center.

Jennifer Pizer, managing attorney of the Western regional office of Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a lesbian and gay legal group, told the *Times* that winning passage of anti-discrimination laws would be easier if legislators knew how many gay and lesbian constituents they have.

But some expressed concern that many people wouldn't mark a "gay" category anyway, for fear of how that information might be used. That could in turn prompt a huge undercount of the gay and lesbian population, which could provide opponents of gay rights with ammunition of their own.

"We look forward to the 2010 census when more discriminatory barriers will have fallen and questions about sexual orientation can be asked more directly and answered more honestly," says Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign.

But for now, says McCombs, "It's frustrating that people have an easier time grasping a sense of minority based on race and ethnicity. It's as if they are saying there's no purpose to knowing how many gays and lesbians are out there."

■ *Are you peeved about the census? Let Just Out know in a letter to the editor. Send your opinion in 500 words or less to justout@justout.com or P.O. Box 14400, Portland, OR 97293-0400; or submit it online at www.justout.com. You can fax your letter to (503) 236-1257.*

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