

SOFT SELL SOLUTION

Bigot Busters hit the streets—and shopping centers—on a nonconfrontational voter education mission by Jonathan Kipp

While many Portlanders were just starting their Memorial Day weekend with a favorite espresso drink, nearly a dozen decided to do something different—spread the word.

Bigotry is back in Oregon and, as usual, sexual minorities are the target. As summer approaches, a small army of anti-gay petitioners are working on weekends to keep Oregon's children safe. That is what the Oregon Citizens Alliance is telling voters, anyway.

The Bigot Busters want to make sure voters hear the other side before they sign the OCA's petition. Children aren't in danger, the Busters say, all Oregonians are in danger.

"The legalization of discrimination against

spread implications and that all Oregonians would be negatively impacted.

"This will effect all youth," says Bigot Buster Jordana Sardo.

This is a touchy subject, Laverdure adds, referring to the issue of homosexuality and children.

"People are concerned about their kids. They're playing on the myth that pedophilia is perpetrated by gays," she says.

Adrienne Weller, a veteran activist, says she heard anti-gay pundits on National Public Radio talking about classes on lesbianism offered by public schools.

"They want to stop something that isn't happening," Weller says.

Bigot Busters is not so much an organization



Bigot Busters taking a break to confer with one another at Eastport Plaza

anyone is the first step," a veteran Bigot Buster says.

A combination of neophytes and veterans from the days of measures 9 and 13 gathered at Portland's Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center to learn the ins and outs of being a Bigot Buster. The training session lasted an hour; it focused on the rules of bigot busting and covering the tactics used by the other side—namely, the OCA and the Oregon chapter of the Christian Coalition.

The goal? To educate voters and defuse the misinformation campaign being waged by the OCA and the Christian Coalition, according to organizer Jennifer Laverdure.

Bigot Busters, who go out into the communities where voters are likely to sign initiative petitions, are intent on reaching the people who are interested in what they have to say. The volunteers provide information to potential voters about anti-gay initiatives and legislation. The group has no interest in debating with the OCA, organizers say.

"They will try to goad you into debate and push your buttons with their bigoted statements and remarks," the Bigot Busters' policy warns.

The group members work in pairs and are instructed to remain calm and orderly in the event tempers flare or the police arrive.

The policy states: "We are not to be arrested."

The OCA is busy collecting signatures to put its "Student Protection Act" on November's ballot. The initiative, if passed, would prevent schools (including community colleges) from presenting any information about homosexuality or bisexuality "in a manner which encourages, promotes or sanctions such behaviors."

The state chapter of the Christian Coalition has joined the OCA in the effort to gather the 66,786 signatures needed by the July 7 deadline. Critics say the initiative would have wide-

or movement as much as bigot busting is a technique, Weller explains. The approach started in Oregon during an anti-gay campaign in 1992, when several members of the Portland-based organization Radical Women went to the streets to convince voters they were being duped by the OCA. While the Bigot Busters came out of the No on 9 campaign, it since has become a mainstream strategy, Weller explains.

Group organizers say the call for Bigot Busters goes out when needed. There is no office or organization.

Many Oregonians are waiting until July to see if the OCA submits the needed signatures before taking the Student Protection Act seriously, the Busters say. But those at the Bigot Busters training believe they need to be as proactive as possible before the proposed initiative makes it to the ballot.

Following the training session, the participants made their way to Eastport Plaza, located along congested Southeast 82nd Avenue.

OCA signature gatherers have recently been spotted at major shopping centers in the area, but they were not present when the Bigot Busters arrived.

It was not clear whether the volunteers were disappointed or relieved. Despite the OCA's absence, the Bigot Busters approached shoppers, handed out their pamphlets and tried to engage voters in a short but poignant conversation.

"We got a good response," Laverdure says of the overall feedback from voters.

But some were surprised that the OCA is back, she says. Many voters said, "Oh, no!"

■ The next BIGOT BUSTERS meeting is planned for 11 a.m. June 3 in Room 201, Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center, 1819 N.W. Everett St. (Donations may be sent to the same address, in care of Radical Women.) For more information, call (503) 228-3090.

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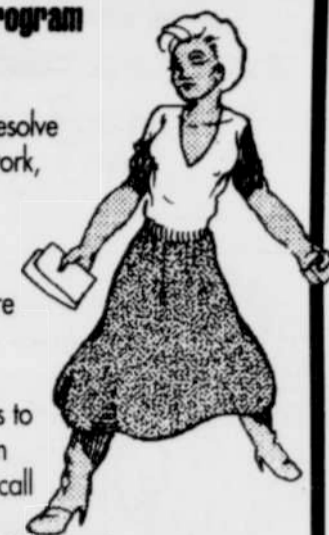


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