

SO FAR, SO GOOD

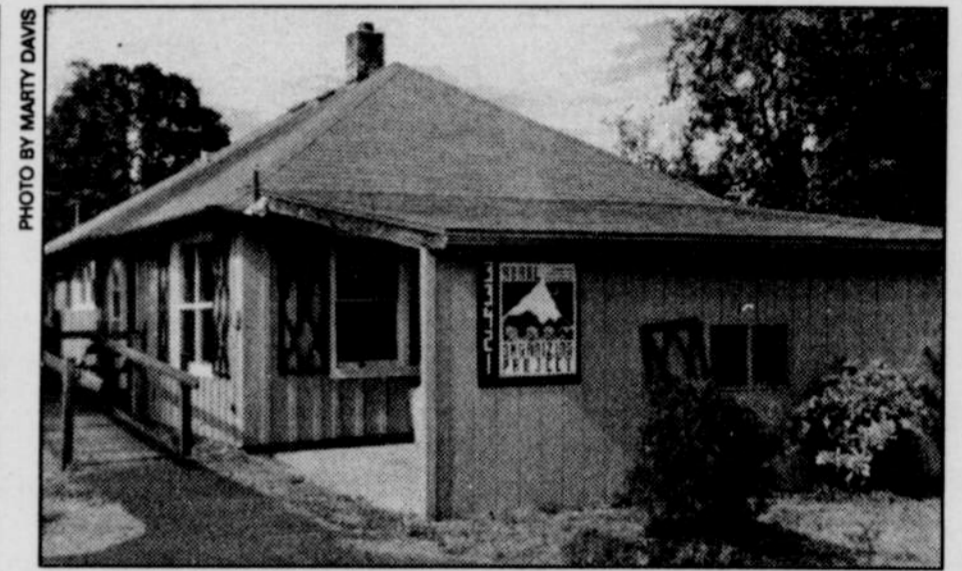
The Rural Organizing Project has been pulling together people from every corner of Oregon for 10 years

BY TOM STEVENSON



It's a simple little house, nestled between a commercial area and a quaint neighborhood in a small Oregon town.

Inside that little house, however, many fabulous things are being done to benefit generations to come. The dedicated people doing the work have made a profound impact on the lives of every gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans person who calls Oregon home.



Big things happen in this little house

They accomplish their work on a budget that at times is tight. They accomplish their work because they believe until it is safe to be a gay person living out in the most remote section of Oregon, no one is actually safe. They fight for farmworkers just as hard as they fight for sexual minorities. They remind us that much work remains to be done.

They are the folks who make up the Rural Organizing Project. That little house sits in Scappoose, a small town just a short distance from Portland but in many ways a world apart. Co-directors Marcy Westerling and Kelley Weigel, along with two other staff members, pull together people from literally every corner of Oregon to accomplish some of the most amazing tasks imaginable.

All of those who have benefited from the work of ROP can thank Lon Mabon in a weird sort of way. Had it not been for the Oregon Citizens Alliance's attempts to wreak havoc on the gay community, ROP never might have come to be.

Yet, as so many people have noted during the past nine years since that first major fight, he actually started a dialogue in Oregon that never really had taken place. Certainly every family had a gay uncle or a lesbian neighbor, but the topic was not something that was discussed over the dinner table in Klamath Falls, Burns, Brookings or The Dalles.

"Every family in this state had to talk about it," says Westerling, who was the driving force in the formation of this one-of-a-kind grassroots organization. "Before then, it was there, but they didn't have to talk about it. What we did was say: 'OK, since you're talking about it, maybe we can tell you about it. Maybe we can tell you the truth.' "

An informational handout describes the ROP mission: "The Rural Organizing Project supports the growing grassroots movement for social justice in small-town, rural and frontier Oregon. Since 1991, rural Oregonians have been organizing human dignity groups across the state to uphold the values of democracy and inclusion in their communities with the support of the ROP. Member groups seek local, community-based ways to promote common values around social justice and come together to affect issues statewide through the ROP."

More than 50 groups, along with countless individuals, constitute ROP. The staff works closely with a board that includes residents of such diverse counties as Josephine, Lake, Coos and Columbia.

Working hand in hand with human dignity groups is truly the backbone of ROP. The organization focuses on four "justice areas": racial, democratic, gender and economic. Collaborating with groups such as the Illinois Valley Task Force on Social Justice in