

the southern section of the state and the Grant County Civil Liberties Network in Eastern Oregon, ROP does battle wherever the fight happens to appear.

That means when racism arises in Bend, a statewide network of groups is ready to do whatever it takes to get the problem solved. That means sexual minorities of all ages and all social brackets, located in every single rural community, have a huge voice to speak up for them. That means when key democracy issues are on the ballot and people need help getting the message out, they call on ROP. That means when economic justice becomes a battle cry in someplace like quiet little Illinois Valley, a statewide organization is ready to step in.

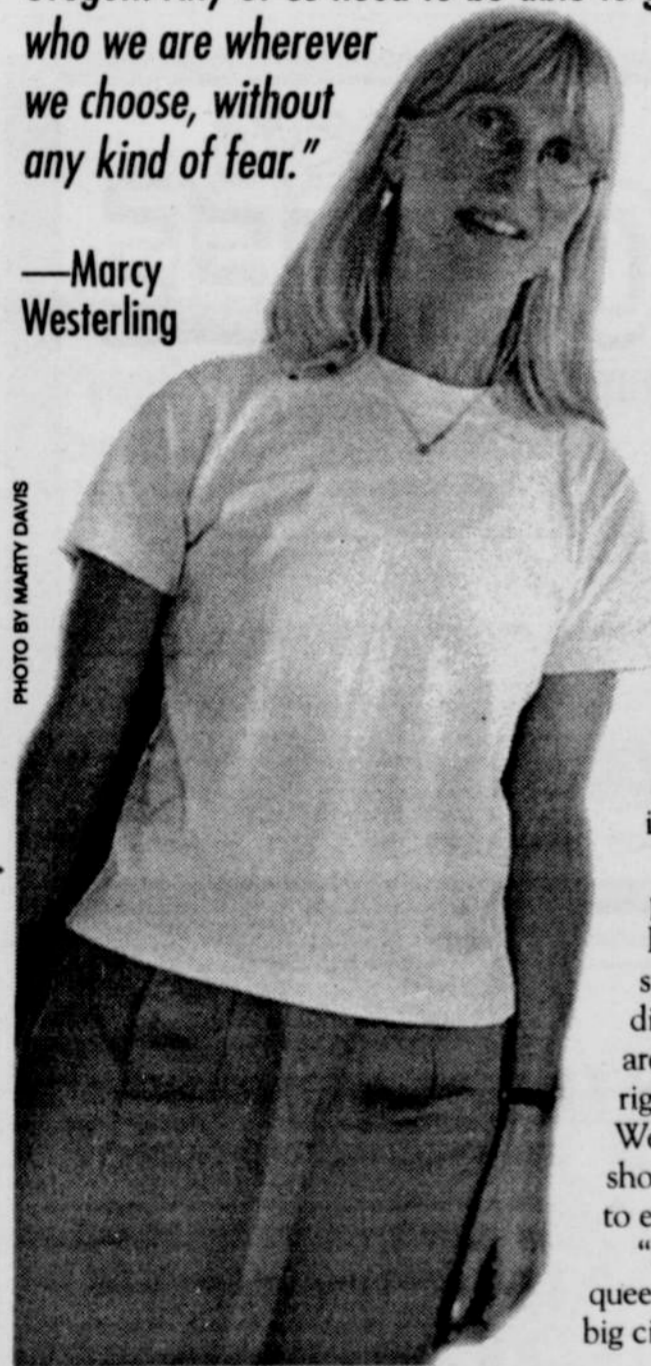
The biggest share of the state's gay and lesbian community does not live in rural Oregon, so ROP comes in handy when the entire community is embroiled in a controversial matter. The gay and lesbian community has defeated Mabon at the poll three times since 1992, and the vast majority tends to think "every gay and lesbian won," according to Westerling.

But the fact of the matter is not everyone won. The huge "no" vote in Portland swung the election against Mabon and his cohorts, but in most rural counties the "yes" group came out ahead. That means every single gay and lesbian living in those counties had to face the likelihood that their friends and neighbors chose to discriminate against them.

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—Marcy Westerling

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS



As Westerling explains it, when people are sitting in their "gay oasis" in Northwest Portland, they need to remember many, many sexual minorities in rural Oregon have no such place to be safe. Instead of facing subtle reminders of discrimination, they are faced with outright hostility. That, Westerling says, should be an outrage to everyone. "It's not just about queer ZIP codes in the big cities," she adds. "It

should not be wrong to be gay or lesbian in rural Oregon. Any of us need to be able to go and be who we are wherever we choose, without any kind of fear. That is still not the case."

1992's No on 9 Campaign brought together people who believe in equality for all. And having Mabon as the identifiable "bully" made the work easier in some ways, according to Westerling.

But when she tackles other projects, especially those during nonelection years, the task is more difficult. For instance, ROP is one of the many sponsors of the Walk for Farmworker Justice in Oregon—an issue that lacks a specific foe.

"The OCA was a lovely enemy," Westerling says. "They were everything you would want the bully to be. When we're dealing with issues like those facing farmworkers...they don't have a Lon Mabon. It does make it harder to get a conversation going."

The fact of the matter, Westerling notes, is that one issue truly does tie in with the other. There indeed are farmworkers who are also queer. There are justice issues that affect people who happen to be gay or lesbian in ways that have nothing to do with their sexual orientation.

"If we care about homophobia, and fighting it, we have to care about the other stuff as well," Westerling says. "The conversation won't be over until we've dealt with all of the issues."

Growth cannot be measured in gigantic steps, especially when dealing with social issues. These folks know that, so they look at tiny victories in the same way most people look at huge ones.

But the biggest common hurdle they face is the misguided notion that once a victory is won, such as the defeat of an OCA ballot measure, the work is done.

"We cannot simply sit back, brush off our hands and say, 'Well, we did all that work and we won; now let's go play baseball,'" Westerling says. "We did that. And while we were off celebrating, the radical right has always been there preparing for the next fight. We can't forget that we are fighting for our rights. We can't simply say, 'I don't want to do politics anymore.'"

When that happens, Westerling warns, the radical right will be right where they want to be. They will be able to catch their opponents off-guard. And maybe, just maybe, the next fight will not be won. That thought is frightening to all who work with ROP and should be frightening to anyone who believes in justice for all, according to Westerling.

No one has the time nor energy to engage in a battle that is

as emotionally draining as an anti-gay ballot measure on a constant basis. And, as Westerling says, no single person wants to be on the front lines of a fight all the time.

ROP encourages its members to ask themselves what they can do. Do they have an hour or two a week they are willing to dedicate to one of the causes? What one thing can they do that would be meaningful to them yet not exhaust them? How can they remain aware of the issues? How can they stay positive?

To accomplish all this, members staff booths at county fairs throughout the state, spreading the message of ROP. They attend



Kelley Weigel serves as co-director of the Rural Organizing Project

meetings in small towns and share their little victories with those who think like they do.

Westerling says she only has to read the national news to get "really depressed." She sees what is happening under the Bush

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administration, she sees some gigantic steps being taken backward, and she has to deal with those thoughts on an ongoing basis.

Yet she is keenly aware of the fact that each and every person has an "ounce of power."

"Now for some, that ounce is really, really heavy, and for others it is light," Westerling says. "What is important is that people use their power to fight for what they think is right."

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