

NORTHWESTnews

More than 100 activists from Oregon, Washington, California, Nevada, Alaska and Idaho came to town April 19 to 21 for the Northwest GLBT Power Summit.

The purpose was to recruit, train and activate leaders who will work to build effective community support for laws and policies promoting equal rights for sexual minorities. The summit was organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which kicked off the weekend by donating \$25,000 to Basic Rights Oregon, which might face another anti-gay ballot measure this fall.

Executive director Lorri L. Jean spoke with *Just Out* about this year's political climate as campaign season gets under way. Here are some excerpts from the conversation:

Jim Radosta: What do you hope will be accomplished during the summit?

Lorri Jean: Our hope is that we will succeed in really enhancing the skill level of 130 leaders from around the West who will go back to their communities and put what they've learned here to use in a way that is going to significantly advance our cause. Ultimately the goal, of course, is strengthening our movement at the grassroots level so that we can achieve full and complete equality.

JR: Having seen the political climates in other states, how would you say things differ here?

LJ: Well, Oregon's a lot better organized. If we could replicate what Oregon has done around the country—which is what the task force is trying to do—we'd have a lot better win-loss record when it comes to anti-gay ballot measures.

JR: Are other states coming up with similar voter identification programs?

LJ: The first effort in many places is trying to convince them that this is the right way to do it. One of our community's weaknesses, I think, is that we often do not learn from our past mistakes.

Raising tons of money and spending it on television and radio advertising is not going to work. The way we win is by doing good, old-fashioned, door-to-door, phone-to-phone organizing—identifying people who will vote with us and getting them out to vote.

Last year...there were six GLBT-related ballot measures. We were very heavily involved in every one of those areas, training people in the same way we're training them here. For the first time in history in November, we won five out of six—and if we'd had three more weeks in Houston, we would've won in Houston, too.

JR: How many states are facing anti-gay ballot measures this year?

MAY THE TASK FORCE BE WITH YOU

Lorri L. Jean descends on Portland for Northwest GLBT Power Summit
by Jim Radosta



Lorri L. Jean attends a reception April 19 with gay actor Wilson Cruz (*My So-Called Life*), one of 130 activists who came to town for the Northwest GLBT Power Summit

LJ: Right now there are about nine that are looming. Several just popped up in the last few weeks, actually.

One of our primary efforts is in Dade County, Fla., where it's the 25th anniversary of Anita Bryant's infamous Save Our Children campaign. The exact same measure—word for word—is on the ballot again...and we've got to win.

JR: Florida is notoriously stubborn—right now Rosie O'Donnell can't even get a meeting with Gov. Jeb Bush to talk about gay adoption. Do you think her coming out is going to help change people's minds?

LJ: One thing like that can't turn the tide...but it can sure make a hell of a difference, particularly if we can get her focused on activism that is appropriate. After she came out...she paid for full-page ads in a bunch of Florida papers urging legislators to do something on the gay adoption thing, and there's no bill pending! So we need to get her a little bit more coordinated with the gay activists that she eschewed in her interview. She can be a fabulous spokesperson,

but she's got to coordinate with the organized efforts that are already happening to make sure that she's not wasting her money and her time.

JR: Do you anticipate the traditional midterm swing to the left in this year's election, or has Sept. 11 disrupted that trend?

LJ: It's anybody's guess. It's clear that George W. Bush wants to extend the war as long as he can, because if he does he'll get re-elected. But these are not good times in national elections for queer people.

If we lose the Senate, it's going to be horrible. We would've been in a lot worse shape if [Vermont Sen. Jim] Jeffords hadn't changed camps.

JR: Which has had the greater effect on the gay rights movement: the "selection" of President Bush or the aftermath of Sept. 11?

LJ: Definitely the ascension of George W. Bush. I think that the impact of Sept. 11 is still unclear.

Don't let anybody fool you—George W. Bush is not our friend, he's not neutral on our

rights, and he is hurting us. Yet you have the Log Cabin Republicans out there rallying in his support, saying he's not such a bad guy.

But the truth is, behind the scenes, his administration is working diligently against us. And as long as he is in the presidency and we have a conservative Congress, we're not going to make any headway in Washington.

JR: The more we become assimilated, the more gay Republicans will "come out of the closet," the same way black Republicans are more visible now. But have the Log Cabin Republicans become nothing more than apologists for the Bush administration?

LJ: I don't understand how thinking gay people can be Republican, given how the religious fanatics have control of that party. By the same token, I do understand the strategy of advancing our cause from within; I think that's a legitimate strategy. But when they start being apologists about abridgment of our rights, that I can't tolerate.

JR: Does NGLTF ever clash with the Human Rights Campaign, which often takes a more moderate approach to gay rights?

LJ: Where we do have some disagreements is around things like whether it's appropriate to exclude transgender people from [the Employment Non-Discrimination Act]. The task force is leading the way in terms of putting out a message about full and complete equality and no compromise.

There's never been a social justice movement that has had unanimity. That's one of its characteristics.

JR: Do you find it frustrating that the movement is concentrating on "smaller" issues such as hate crimes and safe schools legislation while "bigger" issues such as civil unions and inheritance rights are left unaddressed?

LJ: When you're not well organized enough to push a more omnibus civil rights bill, what you do is you back off and you say, "OK, well, if you won't support our equal rights, will you at least support us not getting beaten and murdered?"

I'm having some growing discomfort with the whole concept of hate crimes bills. I haven't yet decided where I come down on it, but the LGBT Quakers have written a very provocative piece...calling into question the strategy of hate crimes given the criminal justice system in this country.

I would like us to be able to get stronger through efforts like this Power Summit...so that we can push things that really are going to have a lot greater meaning for a larger number of people. **JR**

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