

just out

The IN publication for the OUT population

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GUEST COMMENTARY

BY ROEY THORPE

A turning point

Lon Mabon's failure is our opportunity

On Friday, July 5, Dan Yonker, Amy Hojnowski and I sat on the steps of the Capitol building in Salem, waiting. On the surface, we were waiting to see if the Oregon Citizens Alliance would file petitions for another anti-gay ballot measure.

But that's not the whole story. We were waiting because we knew that the events of that day would determine how Basic Rights Oregon and thousands of our supporters would be spending our summer.

And we were waiting because we had come to believe that if the OCA failed, Basic Rights Oregon would be able to seize the moment to do more than just fight back against negative attacks on our rights.

Lon Mabon never showed up that day, and as we drove home, it dawned on us slowly that we just might look back on that day as a turning point in the history of civil rights for Oregonians. This could be the moment where we take back the power to frame the debate on our rights, where we begin to push forward to end discrimination and gain full equality under the law.

The great news is that BRO is strong enough to lead the way.

And that's a fortunate thing, because there is much to be done in the next couple of years. Oregon still lacks a statewide law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. We must pass such legislation as soon as possible.

Students are harassed in our schools, whether they are or are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bi or trans. We must enforce the new Bullying Bill that was passed by the state Legislature last year. In addition, the state must require schools to adopt non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity.

Same-sex relationships are still not equal under the law to those of heterosexual couples. We will be working hard to remedy this unfair situation and to educate the public about our lives and our families.

How will Basic Rights Oregon accomplish these goals? It won't be easy, but we know what needs to be done; fortunately, we're well on the way.

- **Building a powerful ElectPAC.** Our goal is to raise \$100,000 to change the face of the Legislature by electing candidates who support basic rights during this crucial election.

- **Creating a legislative agenda that prioritizes our goal of full equality.** This is critical because it's been many years since we've had the leadership in the Legislature to get a hearing on a proactive equal rights bill.

- **Drafting legislation and gaining commitments from sponsoring representatives.** We will enter the 2003 session with legislation in hand and sponsors signed on. We are determined to pass civil rights legislation by the end of the next session.

- **Increasing our base of support throughout Oregon.** We will be training more than 250 activists as citizen lobbyists, continuing to add to our database of more than 100,000 progressive voters and working with our coalition partners in urban and rural areas to educate and advocate for basic rights.

We have assembled the best and brightest team here at BRO, increasing our field staff and retaining one of the most respected lobbyists in Oregon. We will use the coalitions we have built during our ballot measure campaigns to show the overwhelming support for fairness and civil rights in our state.

A proactive agenda is critical in Oregon, which once was a leader in civil rights legislation. However, people still can be fired in this state for being perceived as gay, lesbian, bi or trans. A dozen states, plus the District of Columbia, have passed civil rights laws that ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. We've fallen behind.

Oregon could be the next state to join this group, reasserting our national leadership and showing our values of fairness and acceptance.

And we could be the third state in the country to include gender identity in that legislation.

During the past year, as I've met with so many of our supporters, the one concern I've heard over and over again is the desire for Basic Rights Oregon to move civil rights forward. I couldn't agree more, and I'm thrilled that we have this chance to turn the tide.

It's going to take your help to be successful, and I want to challenge you here and now. Whatever time, energy and money you would have put into fighting an OCA ballot measure, I want you to make a commitment to doing twice as much this summer.

It's all too easy to get stuck in a defensive posture and not give just as much of ourselves to work for our own desperately needed civil rights. We have to stand up for ourselves, on our own terms.

I hope that you'll call Basic Rights Oregon or, when we call on you, that you'll rise to the occasion. We're offering you a chance to make history with us, and I'm hoping you'll find that offer irresistible.

It's powerful to speak out against our opponents, but it's transformational to speak out for ourselves, to tell the truth about our lives, to let our honesty and dignity pave the way for the legal changes we need.

The time is now to demand full equality for all Oregonians, regardless of who they love or how they identify. Join this movement—we want you by our side all the way. ☐

ROEY THORPE is executive director of Basic Rights Oregon. For more information call 503-222-6151.

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REFLECTIONS

PUBLISHER AND MANAGING EDITOR • Marty Davis

NEWS EDITOR • Jim Radosta

CULTURE EDITOR • Lisa Bradshaw

CONTRIBUTORS • Marc Acito, Meryl Cohn, Meg Daly, Els Debbaut, Nicole Hooper, Sarah Leimert, Patricia L. MacAodha, Christopher McQuain, Gary Morris, TJ Norris, Floyd Sklover, Caitlin Smith, Jack Turteltaub, Rex Wockner

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR • Larry Lewis

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE • Markie Acevedo

NATIONAL ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE • Rivendell Marketing Company Inc., 212-242-6863

GRAPHIC DIRECTOR • Kevin Moore

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT • Melissa Saylor

OFFICE MANAGER • Erin Sexton

INTERN • Nadia Cannon

DISTRIBUTION • Ed Carder, Ian Drake, Ron Geer, Mary Hauer, Kelly Keigwin, Becky Sawyer, Merid Schwartz, Melissa Weigand



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