

Whim of a Majority

A major blow to marriage equality in Oregon

by Meg Daly

The toughest part of Rebekah Kassell's job the past four months—and there have been many tough parts—was looking out on a sea of faces on election night and seeing couples whose marriages are now in jeopardy.

"I signed some of their marriage licenses," the press secretary for the No on Constitutional Amendment 36 campaign told *Just Out* through her tears the morning after the election.

The mood was one of devastation in the No on 36 office that morning. Election results revealed that Ballot Measure 36 had passed 57 percent to 43 percent.

Kassell and other staff members fielded calls from gay and lesbian couples and other supporters who felt alienated by their own home state.

Kassell talked to one heterosexual woman who called say that her own sense of disenfranchisement at John Kerry's defeat caused her to realize "how all of the gay community in Oregon must be feeling today." The woman decided to call right then and tell the No on 36 campaign that she had voted "no" and that she wanted to know what she could do now to get involved.

After the ballot measure result had been called Nov. 2, Basic Rights Oregon executive director Roey Thorpe spoke to a somber crowd at the Oregon Convention Center. "I know this is a hard night for all of us," she said.

Thorpe talked about the incredible year of highs and lows for the queer community and its supporters.

"Many of us felt the joy of marrying our long-time partners this year," she said. "And now we know the pain of having the right to that marriage put to a public vote. But let me tell you, this is not the way to decide social policy. The

constitution was designed exactly for the purpose of preventing the rights of a minority from being determined by the whims of a majority."

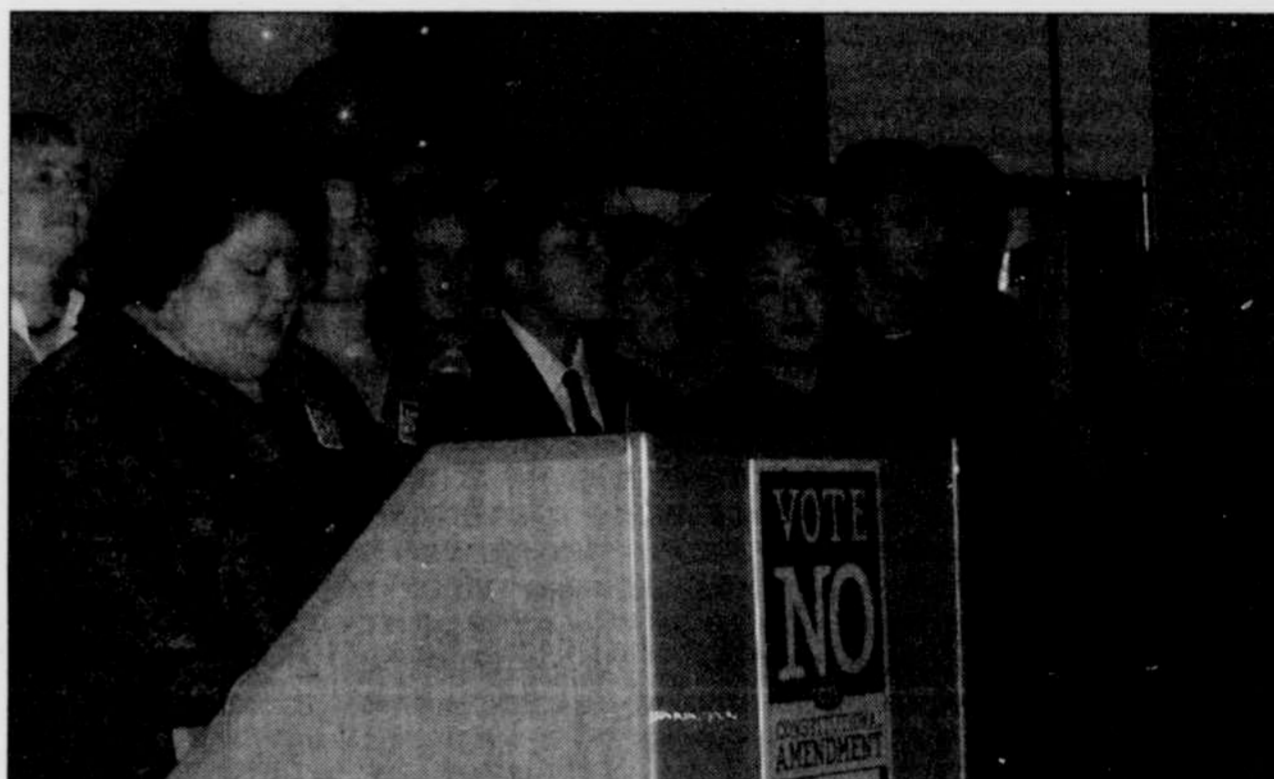
Our sophisticated, well-funded campaign

Thorpe's message was the central tenet of the No on 36 campaign, a message more than 9,000 volunteers took to a quarter-million voters statewide. All that effort made a dramatic impact in the hearts and minds of Oregonians.

According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Oregon was the only state facing an amendment banning same-sex marriage that had anything close to the amount of money needed to run a competitive race, and it came the closest to doing so. When the Oregon campaign started, polls said the measure would carry by 27 points, meaning the effort to defeat it moved the electorate by 19 points in three months. It was the only such campaign to show a significant movement in the electorate during the course of the campaign.

From Salem to Scappoose and beyond, the final weeks were crackling with energy on the campaign trail. Canvassers and phone bankers were out in full force urging citizens to vote against the measure. Marriage equality supporters stood on rainy street corners holding No on 36 signs during morning rush hour.

Everywhere was evidence of the strong coalitions that exist between queer rights groups and other progressive organizations in Oregon. One notable ally, Pinosos y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), had a sign outside its Wood-



Roey Thorpe speaks to an election night crowd at the Oregon Convention Center

burn headquarters urging "Voten 'No' En La 36."

"Many people in the immigrant community...understand the danger in opening up the constitution to unequal treatment," said PCUN's Aeyrca Steinbauer.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Matt Foreman reinforced the importance of building alliances when he visited Portland on Oct. 30 and 31. He called mar-

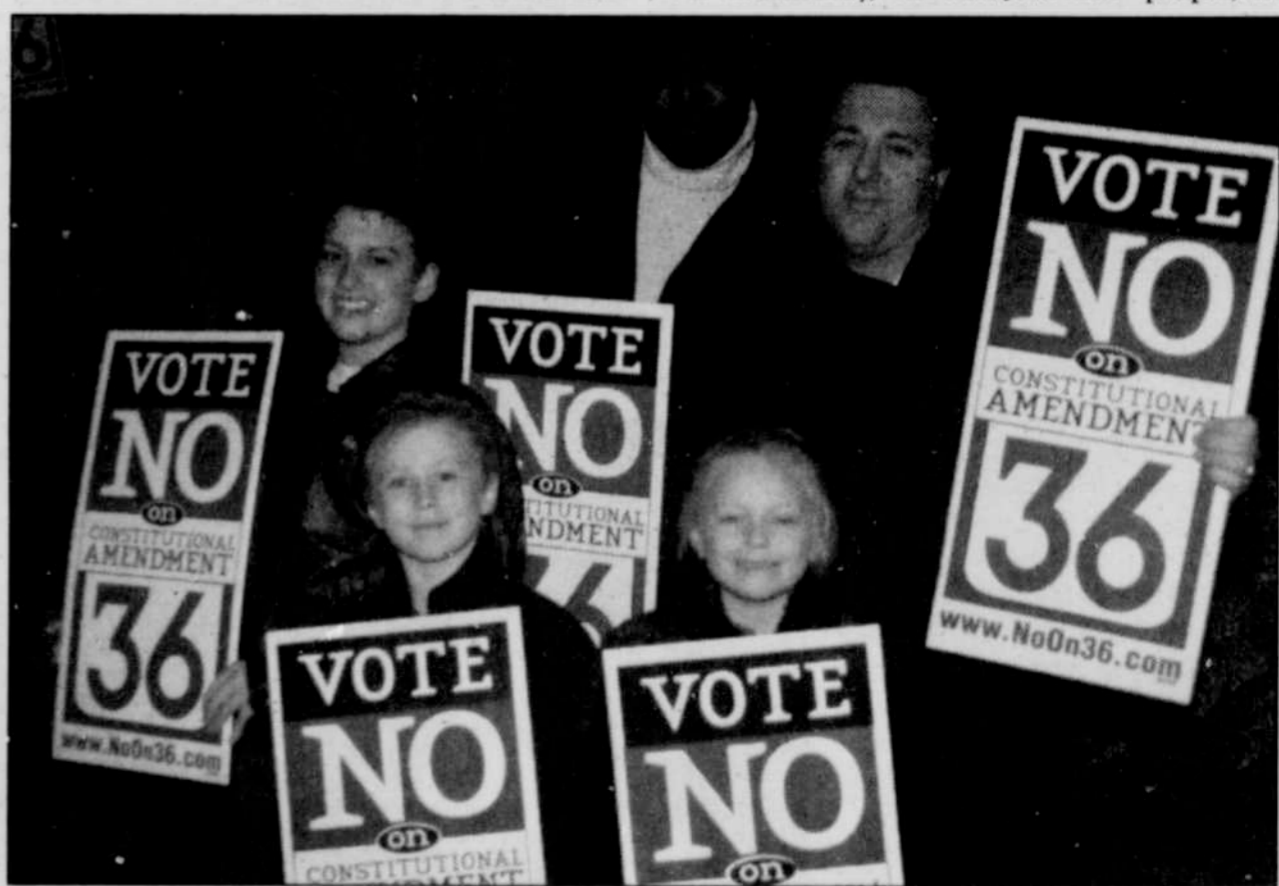
riage "the language of equality" and linked marriage rights to other rights vital to working Americans.

Foreman spoke frankly about the fact that, while wealthy white gay men may be able to afford setting up special trusts and provisions to take care of their partners, "marriage rights are for people who don't have resources," he said.

"Marriage is important to a large segment of our community," he told *Just Out*—people, he



Aisling Coghlan (second from left) and No on 36 campaign staff share the emotion of Thorpe's speech



From a street corner on East Burnside Street, Alex and Kevin Bailey-Gilliam with their children Christian, 12, Ethan, 9, and Madilyn, 8, urge voters to protect their family and vote No on 36

PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS