

Celebration Struggle Courage

We Look Back

2004 shook us in ways we could not have predicted: with the joy of marrying long-loved partners, the bitterness of election defeats and ongoing bigotry in our midst. *Just Out* has collected images and reflections on the year to assess where we have been, and to make a hopeful stab into the unknown future.

No on Constitutional Amendment 36 Campaign by Meg Daly

The Defense of Marriage Coalition surprised marriage equality advocates June 30 by submitting more than 244,000 signatures to place an initiative on the fall ballot that would amend the Oregon Constitution to ban same-sex marriage.

But that's not where this story starts. It starts four months earlier, on Feb. 27, when key members of the coalition filed four ballot measures to ban gay marriage, which they mysteriously withdrew four days later, on March 2, when news leaked that gay marriage was coming to Portland.

That's right. The push to ban same-sex marriage preceded any actual granting of marriage licenses to same-sex couples in the state. While attorney Kelly Clark claims the coalition came together in response to Multnomah County's issuance of marriage licenses to queer couples, it had, in fact, already laid its groundwork. The initiative filed March 12 fit the coalition's contention that it was on the defensive against gay marriage.

Pre-emptive might be the more operative word, given the fact that all five ballot measures share a chief petitioner: Kent Walton, a pastor with the Church of God and member of the Promise Keepers. (The national Christian men's group was bankrolled in its early days by

James Dobson, whose Focus on the Family organization contributed at least \$60,000 to the Yes on 36 campaign.)

The other chief petitioner for Measure 36 was Dennis Truri, a pastor at Oregon City's Reformation Covenant Church, which asks its members to "oppose the disgraceful and abhorrent sins of adultery, abortion and homosexuality."

When the unfortunate news came in that the measure had gotten on the ballot with signatures to spare, Basic Rights Oregon jumped into action. Within days, the No on Constitutional Amendment 36 was launched. At its helm was Aisling Coghlin, an experienced campaign manager with a track record of defeating Bill Sizemore initiatives. She was joined by a team of seasoned queer rights activists including Beckie Lee, who had been a fund-raiser for 2000's No on 9, and consultant Liz Kaufman, who had helped defeat anti-gay measures in the state since 1988.

"You could not go anywhere on planet and get more experience than we had [fighting anti-gay measures]," says Maura Roche, a government relations consultant with BRO.

According to a July poll commissioned by the No on 36 campaign, 46 percent opposed the amendment, with 49 percent in support. The mood and message of the campaign was, "We can win."

But when the election results came in four months later, the amendment passed 57 percent to 43 percent, and the mood changed. Many queers were shocked to wake up Nov. 3

and find that their fellow Oregonians had voted against them, despite the fact that No on 36 had mobilized more than 9,000 volunteers and talked to 250,000 voters statewide about same-sex marriage.

Bob Mensel was not surprised, however. The Portland Gay Men's Chorus artistic director says that as much as he supported the campaign, he knew the stakes were too high. "I don't think there was any winning this ballot initiative."

Mensel, like other community leaders, notes a significant difference between the campaign to defeat Measure 36 and previous campaigns: the opponent.

Portland City Commissioner-elect Sam Adams says that, unlike Lon Mabon and the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the Defense of Marriage Coalition knew how to run an effective campaign.

"The Yes on 36 people ran a professional campaign that kept their extremists off TV and out of mailboxes," he said. "They ran a campaign that appealed to Oregonians who would consider themselves tolerant and even supportive of gay folks."

Roche agrees. "The No. 1 obvious major difference between this campaign and all previous campaigns was that the opposition was organized and well-funded."

In a campaign finance statement filed Dec. 2 with the Oregon Elections Division, the coalition reports raising more than \$2 million. That money allowed it to use traditional campaign mechanisms such as television and radio

ads and direct mail pieces as well as grassroots organizing.

The Rev. Tara L. Wilkins, director of the Community of Welcoming Congregations, says that lack of time was a significant factor in the defeat. "We needed more time in engaging people on issues of sexuality and spirituality."

But she notes the faith community came together like never before on this issue.

"This time, support from faith community was much more unified," she says. "There were more congregations endorsing the No [on 36] campaign and more clergy involved in canvassing."

Scot Nakagawa, a field organizer with 1992's No on 9 campaign, says queers have made great strides in the past decade.

"If we had been faced with a measure about marriage equality in 1992, we would have lost by much larger margin," he says. "I think [the No on 36 campaign] should be commended for the great job that they did."

At the same time that queers have made progress, Nakagawa notes, the right has become more powerful and mainstream. "I don't think that any of us would have imagined that they would have gotten so much better organized so quickly."

He says that is scary news. But he also sees opportunity for large-scale progressive organizing.

"Many people have been pushed against the wall by the right, and we can reach people we haven't been able to reach before."



"How is my marriage under attack if two gays or lesbians down the street want to make a lifelong commitment to themselves.... Government should not have the right to tell you who you fall in love with and who you want to spend your life with.... We are not >>