

Governor's Task Force on Equality

Despite these seemingly insurmountable setbacks, counter forces were beginning to gather. Gov. Ted Kulongoski, responding to the failure of SB 1000, appointed the Task Force on Equality in February 2006 to study the issue.

November's election also signaled a change. Democrats retained their Senate majority but also seized the House. Kulongoski soundly beat his Republican opponent, the self-styled "family values" candidate, Ron Saxton. His re-election strengthened his position relative to his politically weaker first term, when his election came from a more narrow victory and Kulongoski faced a divided Legislature.

In mid-December 2006, just a few weeks after Kulongoski's re-election, the 11-member task force released a 28-page report with two key recommendations. After studying the issue in Oregon and the United States, including a review of legal precedents and laws in other states and localities, the task force recommended that Oregon enact anti-discrimination protections and legalize a form of civil union similar to the Vermont model that went into effect in January 2001.

The task force concluded that protections taken for granted by other "suspect" classes—including racial, ethnic and religious groups with a history of persecution—should be extended to sexual minorities.

According to the report, certain rights enjoyed under marriage and other related statutes in civil law by the straight majority should be extended to gay Oregonians. Citing the critical importance of equality to make the state competitive in the world economy and to attract businesses, the authors concluded that the Legislature must act to rectify the lack of equal protection under the law, seeing it as a matter of basic fairness.

The Oregon Equality Act, Senate Bill 2, was introduced in the Senate Judiciary Committee and would amend Oregon's anti-discrimination statutes to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the familiar categories of race, religion, national origin and disability. The statute would prohibit discrimination in the areas of housing, public accommodation, employment, education and public services. The bill underwent public hearings in committee March 12 and was voted out of committee by a 3-1 vote. The dissenting vote was cast by state Sen. Jeff Kruse, R-Roseburg, who claimed the bill was poorly written and would violate the constitution.

Under the current patchwork of protection provided by mostly urban counties and municipalities, queer citizens might have no protection or full protection depending on where they live and work. Absurdly, a woman might be protected in her home ZIP code but not in her employer's ZIP code five or 10 miles away, and could theoretically be fired without recourse for no other reason than being lesbian.

Bryan Boyd, communications coordinator for Basic Rights Oregon, said his organization, which helped craft the bill, is pleased with the final product. "Without a doubt, we fully back this legislation." Boyd pointed out that the bill will protect gays only in Oregon, but by setting a single, enforceable standard here, it will bring a significant improvement to the quality of life for sexual minority residents.



As chairwoman of the Ethics, Elections and Rules Committee, state Rep. Diane Rosenbaum introduced House Bill 2007.



Activist Christine Chávez told citizen lobbyists that her commitment to gay rights would continue until same-sex couples were afforded the same rights extended to her and her husband, Oscar Gonzalez.

¡Sí, Se Puede!

Activists rally for equality

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Yes, we can" was a battle cry for the approximately 500 Oregonians who gathered March 7 at the Oregon Capitol for a lobbying event and rally organized by Basic Rights Oregon.

The mantra was led by Christine Chávez, granddaughter of United Farm Workers of America co-founder César Chávez.

Chávez, who carries out her grandfather's activism in the labor and civil rights movements, educated her Salem audience about the revolutionary's lifetime commitment to equality for gays—a controversial position, particularly among Catholic Latino families in the 1970s. "You can't champion equality for your own people when you tolerate discrimination," Chávez said.

Oregonians posed as citizen lobbyists to discuss Senate Bill 2, the Oregon Equality Act, and House Bill 2007, the Oregon Family Fairness Act, with lawmakers in their districts. SB 2 stood up to a committee hearing March 12 and passed with a 3-1 vote. Next, the bill heads to the full Senate floor for a debate and vote. HB 2007 will likely be debated in committee early next month.

The bills were created in direct response to recommendations made by Gov. Ted Kulongoski's Task Force on Equality, which announced its findings in December. SB 2 and HB 2007 address discrimination and legally recognized relationships, respectively.

Supportive lawmakers who attended the rally and opening session described a climate of support for equality legislation at the Capitol that was not present

in the 2005 session, which swallowed the bills' predecessor, Senate Bill 1000.

Kulongoski said the "basic fairness package" is in line with his "highest priority to grow the Oregon economy," which, he added, leads to safer cities, better schools and greater opportunity for citizens. "It's morally unacceptable not to."

The governor, wielding a pen poised to sign the bills into law, bellowed: "Bring me the bills. This is the session we will make Oregon the land of opportunity for all."

Others who spoke in support of the measures were state Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem; House Speaker Jeff Merkley, D-Portland; Rep. Tina Kotek, D-Portland; Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown, D-Portland; House Majority Leader Dave Hunt, D-Clackamas County; and Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams. State Sens. Avel Gordly, I-Portland; Alan Bates, D-Ashland; and Ben Westlund, D-Tumalo, and Treasurer Randall Edwards took the stage in a show of support. Darryl Moch, executive director of Brother to Brother, was the rally's master of ceremonies.

Rounding out the day of activism were educational workshops titled "Building a Trans-Inclusive Movement," "Racial Justice," "Faith in Action" and "Immigrant Rights Equals GLBT Rights...Really?"

Chávez had this message for sexual minority Oregonians that she learned from her grandfather's movement: "It takes time. We have setbacks, but it keeps moving forward. You constantly remember *sí, se puede* to energize your base, just like farmworkers." **10**

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