

northwest

OK to Be Gay

New BRO executive director will spread the word

by Julie Sabatier

Amid its success in the Legislature, Basic Rights Oregon made an important announcement this month. After a lengthy search and several rounds of interviews, the state's largest nonprofit gay rights organization has hired an executive director.

John Hummel comes to BRO from Denver, where he has served as legal director for the Legal Initiative Project at the GLBT Community Center of Colorado since 2004.

"When it came down to it, our decision to go for John was really pretty easy. Not that the other candidates weren't great, because they were," said BRO board co-chairwoman Cris Land. "He brings a passion and a commitment to GLBT equality and to social justice work that's really outstanding and really set him apart from the other candidates."

Hummel, 48, is perhaps best known for his work in his hometown of Boise, Idaho, where he and his then partner Brian Bergquist helped organize the state's first gay rights organization, Your Family Friends and Neighbors, the group responsible for Idaho's first Pride celebration in 1990.

Despite hostility toward sexual minorities in the traditionally conservative state, Hummel and the organization were able to defeat 1994's homophobic Proposition 1. The ballot measure was modeled after Oregon's failed 1992 Ballot Measure 9, which would have banned open discussion of homosexuality in schools and changed the state constitution to include a description of homosexual behavior as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse."

"One of the things that really attracted me to Basic Rights Oregon was I went through the same thing that people in Oregon did in Idaho through that anti-gay measure that we lived through," said Hummel. "I fought on a different front in the anti-gay wars in Idaho, and the people in Oregon certainly they were on the main front, really."

Hummel, who attended University of Washington and graduated from Lewis & Clark Law School in 1986, says he has always felt a solidarity with Oregonians and has been on BRO's mailing list since the group's inception in 1988.

He says his first inkling that gay advocacy was in his future was shortly after he returned to Boise after law school, and the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Bowers v. Hardwick*, upholding state laws against sodomy. "I was so outraged in reading this decision that, even though I didn't follow through on it for a couple years, I made up my mind right then that I had to do something about it. I couldn't be silent. I couldn't be safe."

Hummel landed a prestigious position as deputy attorney general. He was assigned to the Idaho Department of Employment, where he says he gained a lot of experience that has served him well in his career as an advocate against discrimination.



From left, Human Rights Campaign co-founder Terry Bean, former Gov. Barbara Roberts and Basic Rights Oregon's brand new executive director, John Hummel, spoke April 18 at BRO's annual luncheon.

His boss in the state office was supportive, he says, when Hummel came out publicly and began organizing Your Family Friends and Neighbors.

"I do know that it was an unusual thing for a deputy attorney general to come out as gay," he explained. "I mean, no one had ever done that before. In fact, there weren't any attorneys who were out in the entire state. I was it."

After Proposition 1 was defeated, Hummel left the attorney general's office to begin a private practice in 1994. Through the campaign, he had come out to the entire state, and felt he was in it for the long haul.

"I wasn't fleeing to a so-called 'gay ghetto' like San Francisco or New York or even Seattle or Portland, which at that time had much more developed gay communities than Boise did," he explained. "Today, it's really OK to be gay in Boise, Idaho, and I do take some small credit for that in the work that I did and the groups I was organizing in, because I think we made it OK to be gay."

In 2003, Hummel closed his private practice to pursue gay activism full time. He continued to keep an eye on BRO from Colorado, he says, and he's got some ideas about how to broaden the base of support for BRO in his new capacity as executive director.

"We can't just be out; we actually have to go that extra mile and talk to people in our lives about what it means to be gay, and that is harder," Hummel said. "One of the things I'm really interested in is exploring ways that we can really encourage people to do that in meaningful ways, and not just in Portland, and not just in Eugene, and not just in Corvallis, but in places like Burns, in places like Malheur County and Pendleton, places where it's still not OK to be gay." (Hummel says his extensive knowledge of Oregon geography is due in part to the fact that his mother grew up in Huntington.)

After three years in Colorado, Hummel says he's ready to move back to the Pacific Northwest. "To me, it's almost like moving home," he said. Hummel and his partner, Ben Riggs, will relocate to Portland in May. 19

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