

northwest

READY TO RUMBLE

Basic Rights Oregon prepares to fight off challenges to equal rights laws

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

Ring the opening match bell. Basic Rights Oregon's executive director, Jeana Frazzini, is dusting off her boxing gloves and prepping for another ugly fight.

Responding to the news that four elected officials have co-authored two separate initiative petitions to repeal both the Oregon Family Fairness Act, House Bill 2007, and the Oregon Equality Act, Senate Bill 2, Frazzini says BRO is ready to enter the ring again for the "incredible challenge" of defending the new laws.

But while Frazzini said she was not surprised by the idea of the law being challenged again by equal right opponents, she was taken aback by who she'll be facing this time out: state Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, and state Rep. Sal Esquivel, R-Medford, sponsors of the HB 2007 repeal initiative; and state Sen. Gary George, R-McMinnville, and state Rep. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, sponsors of the SB 2 repeal initiative.

"It was not what I had expected to see, particularly given that...these two legislators were elected to fundamentally protect Oregonians," Frazzini said.

The involved legislators saw things differently.

Esquivel considers the Oregon Family

Fairness Act to be a bait-and-switch, as it accords same-sex couples the full range of rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples while not actually calling itself marriage. "If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck and quacks like a duck... you get what I'm saying here," he said.

Thatcher, agreed, saying in a statement, "This issue should be decided by voters, not the Legislature." Referencing the Measure 36 voter decision to define marriage as between one man and one woman, she added, "Oregon voters spoke loud and clear against gay marriage a few years ago, and I believe this new law goes against the voters' wishes."

According to records in counties across Oregon, more than 1,300 same-sex couples have registered as domestic partners as of March 4. For Taylor West, 64, and Ann Hubbard, 60, who rushed out the morning of Feb. 4 to register their partnership (see "Family Portraits" in the Feb. 15 *Just Out*),

the myriad legal protections accorded to them by the Family Fairness Act are critical. "We're getting older now, and it's important to be with each other and make those kinds

of medical decisions," Hubbard said. Frazzini articulated this as one of the key themes in BRO's upcoming fight against the initiative: Quite simply, she said, the repeal of the act would "put couples in harm's way."

State Rep. Tina Kotek, D-North/Northeast Portland, an out lesbian who partnered with Aimee Wilson under the domestic partnership law, said her colleagues sponsoring these initiatives couldn't be further out of touch with Oregonians, predicting that "the opponents will have a harder time getting signatures."

"People are ready to fight to keep what we've won," she said. "These laws are not threatening anybody. Gay and lesbian couples just want to move on with their lives."

This type of fight is not new to BRO. Just last year, the organization—then led by executive director John Hummel—fended off two separate ballot initiatives to drive the embattled laws to a public vote in November 2008. The anti-gay effort—spearheaded by ubiquitous former state Sen.

Marilyn Shannon, R-Brooks, emerging as a chief architect of the latest initiatives, and David Crowe's Restore America—fell about 1,500 signatures short of the 55,179 required, although the domestic partnership initiative was briefly pro-



Jeana Frazzini

longed by a scurrilous lawsuit brought by the Alliance Defense Fund against Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury. That suit was dismissed Feb. 1, allowing for same-sex couples to register as domestic partners.

Another consideration in this round of the fight: The bar is raised for the actual number of signatures needed to get the initiatives in front of voters. Both initiatives need 82,769 valid signatures to proceed to the ballot.

Sounding a positive note amid the mounting match, Frazzini says the latest fight is nothing more than "another opportunity for our broad community of fair-minded Oregonians to stand together to send a loud and strong message to these folks that we will not accept your sort of view of the world, that this is about continuing to create a culture of fairness and equality in Oregon, and while I would much prefer to be getting to work on implementing the law," she said, "we take it as it comes." 10



Sal Esquivel



Gary George



Fred Girod



Kim Thatcher

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