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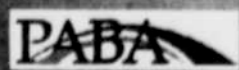
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Voices Of The Occupation

Rural Organizing Project founder Marcy Westerling brings Big Pharma med shortages to the frontlines

BY RYAN J. PRADO, WITH PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

Since October 6, the Occupy movement has been an unavoidable presence in the heart of Portland. Initially, a several-thousand-strong march through downtown settled at Chapman and Lowndale Squares, prompting lively debate between both the protest's "tent city" inhabitants and city officials, including Mayor Sam Adams. In solidarity with the Occupy movement's giving voice to the 99 percent are sizable chunks of rural and small-town activists. Marcy Westerling just may represent the blueprint for this segment of protesters.

As founder of the Rural Organizing Project, established in 1992, Westerling's reputation as a critical grassroots activist precedes her. With ROP, she sought to unite small-town leaders and figure out how to address hot-button progressive issues. While the radical right attempted to lay claim to more politically isolated towns throughout Oregon during the late 1980s and early '90s, ROP stepped in at a crucial legislative time for statewide civil rights: Measure 9. That initiative—championed by the Oregon Citizens Alliance in 1992, which targeted gays and lesbians as "abnormal," and would have relegated the LGBTQ community to second-class citizenship—was defeated in no small part due to the work of ROP.

Though queer rights became a cornerstone for the state's introduction to ROP, the group, says Westerling, tried to put that fight into a larger context of understanding how the right was using the queer rights platform to build and move the "kind of agenda that we've seen unrolling over the last two decades." ROP has made broad efforts to expand its activist agenda in the 18 years since its inception.

"I think in small-town America, where you have fewer people willing to talk about progressive issues, it's really important that they don't just talk about one issue of concern," explains Westerling.

But for Westerling, 52, her participation in solidarity with the nationwide Occupy movement revolves around one very serious issue of concern. She was diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer in spring 2010, necessitating her departure from leadership at ROP, and her subsequent fellowship position at the like-minded Open Society Institute. Her condition continues to worsen due to her being placed on a wait list for the drug Doxil.

Westerling openly blames the profit-focused mechanics of the corporate pharmaceutical engine for the rationing of the drug. During the first day of Occupy Portland, she could be seen holding a sign reading: "Wait Listed for Chemo; Thanks Big Pharma and



Wall Street; Stage 4 Ovarian Cancer."

"It's really about this whole progression that we've been seeing about profit and greed leading the values of our country," explains Westerling, who notes that there are more than 200 intravenous drugs that are no longer available or are very hard to get for folks with serious medical conditions. "My cancer is physical, it's growing, I need that drug right now. But instead of being able to get it any time in 2011, I'm on a wait list. Obviously my cancer is not going to wait. My life is very much in jeopardy as a result of this kind of greed."

While the mainstream media has thus far struggled to put a face to the Occupy movement—outside of parodying the easy target of squatting masked as neo-hippie activism—its general anti-corporate grievances are typified by strong, in-your-face cases like that of Westerling.

Doxil reportedly represents less than 1 percent of pharmaceutical corporation Johnson & Johnson's revenues. But Ben Venue Labs, the manufacturer of the drug, claims that the problem is not one of profit. Rather, in an article published in *The Courier-Journal*, a Ben Venue spokesperson would only say that the company was facing "capacity re-

straints" with the manufacturing of such a complex drug. These statements disregard the fact that Ben Venue is seeking to get out of the Doxil business altogether, meaning J&J will be even harder pressed to produce Doxil for the many patients nationwide in need of it.

It's this kind of profit-fueled bureaucracy that most Occupy protesters shake a common fist at. For her part, Westerling feels that her foundations with ROP have made it possible for not only metro areas, but also small communities—as many as 10 small Occupy movements are currently functioning in Oregon—to stand up and be heard.

"Our big effort has been to say, 'This is not an urban anger, this needs to be really a 99 percent anger,' which includes an enormous