



True blue

PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

Marcy Westerling, the founder of Rural Organizing Project, in her garden in Southeast Portland.

Marcy Westerling, founder of Rural Organizing Project, reflects on the flow of community organizing in Oregon, as her own life takes a new direction

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

After 30 years, Marcy Westerling recently returned to Saul Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals," the famous and controversial book on community organizing used by both the Left and the Right. In those years between, however, the book and its principles never gathered dust under Westerling's stewardship.

After years with ACORN, and later creating a rural women's crisis network, Westerling founded the Rural Organizing Project, or ROP, taking her brand of grassroots organizing and turning it into a galvanizing force among pro-democracy groups operating in small towns across Oregon. ROP created a structure through which groups from all backgrounds could organize around common causes. It created human dignity groups in 50 rural communities throughout the state that brought divergent perspectives and agendas into political discussion.

Its first target was 1992's Proposition 9, the anti-gay ballot measure put forward by the well-heeled conservative group Oregon Citizens Alliance, which claimed its roots in rural, right-wing Oregon. ROP organized the opposition, and the measure was defeated. In the nearly 20 years since, ROP has addressed farm workers' rights, immigration issues and economic justice, organizing strategic caucuses to move forward.

In 2009, Westerling accepted a fellowship with the Open Society Institute to take the tactics of community "mapping" nationwide; to create a toolkit in essence that people could adapt for their community. She was just getting started on the work when in the spring of 2010 she was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer. She has had to scale back her work with the Open Society Institute, and she and her husband Mike moved from their beloved farm in Scappoose to Southeast Portland to be closer to her health care. She continues working on the mapping project and with

ROP, working to keep the dialogue going from all sources. She remains committed to bridging false cultural divides, as she has called them, and staying healthy, even though she is quite frank about the odds. She embodies the progressive movement in fighting the right-wing takeover of rural America, and she can handle just about anything someone wants to dish out — just don't call her a liberal.

Marcy Westerling: Liberal has never been a word I've been comfortable with.

Joanne Zuhl: Why not?

M.W.: I'm more interested in the content of the belief system. We believe in the words of every human being. We believe that every zip code no matter where it's located is important. We believe that every issue is connected. And we believe that no rights supersede the rights of others. It's a little more nuanced and value-based, but we've been able to have a lot of members who maybe are not comfortable with the next issue we will approach or the last issue we did approach. Our umbrella has to be big enough.

J.Z.: Most people think of Oregon in general as being fairly progressive, and certainly Portlanders feel confident in their liberal identity. You've worked all over the state. What's your take on that?

M.W.: Well, I feel a little like a refugee at the moment. I moved entirely as my best strategy for staying alive, so it wasn't really a choice.

But I've always felt like my organizing is about community and place based, whether it's zip code by zip code or hamlet by hamlet.

I do come home and say, "you know, honey, this is not that different from Scappoose." Even though the metropolitan area in Oregon has that kind of vote you can

count on, the numbers that swing elections to a safety place, there are still a whole lot of people who live here who are not part of that set. Celebrate diversity — that's never been a bumper sticker that's worked for me. I don't think you celebrate diversity, you celebrate whatever you want in the privacy of your own home, but democracy is about, "it's not your fucking business." Tolerance is the first step, and people may or may not get to a place of celebration, but that actually doesn't matter in a civil society, and in fact, if you ask people to celebrate, it can get really superficial. No, celebrate on your own time, when you're here, everyone's equal.

J.Z.: Are your amplifying isolation when you celebrate diversity?

M.W.: I think it's very false. Especially when those same people aren't willing to celebrate the diversity of thought within a neighborhood, which hopefully means that there's a whole lot of people who vote totally in opposition to the way you think, and are you really celebrating that diversity? So I just think it's so liberal... (laughter)

J.Z.: I read where you said that political battles in small towns have a tenor all their own. Can you explain that?

M.W.: I think the value of organizing in a smaller town community is you're forced to look at organizing versus being an activist. And to me I would define being an activist as really just being willing to agitate around a cause. Really agitate around the restrictions of people's minds. We need activism, we need agitation, but in a small town, if you want to stay there, as opposed to moving on, you have to figure out what's going to keep you in a conversation. I just feel like with Alinsky, he's got a really long

See TRUE BLUE, page 5