

No on 36 volunteer Elise Self



JAMES BATEMAN

“Why we’re discussing some people’s basic rights does not make me happy. But I do think that historically, Oregonians have been very careful to protect the Constitution, and I think that will continue.”

—Elise Self, No on Measure 36

DEFINE AND CONQUER

What’s driving the divisive Measure 36?

By Kera Abraham

Every family is different, but most parents want to protect their children. And Measure 36, which seeks to amend the Oregon Constitution to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman, has parents concerned on both sides of the issue.

Elise Self, a volunteer for the No on 36 campaign, has advocated for gay rights since her daughter Jennifer came out in 1992. “I realized right away that there was a possibility that she would be treated differently for the rest of her life because she was a lesbian,” says Self, her voice honeyed by a Southern lilt. “I’m like a mother lion. I want to protect her and take care of her.”

Another mother, Marie Bell, the Lane County spokeswoman for the Yes on 36 campaign, has worked with children’s issues all her life. A homemaker since the birth of her first daughter in 1975, she sits on the board at the local Child Advocacy Center. “I have studied enough to know how children do best,” says Bell, her hands folded neatly in her lap. “As a

policy, we need to give preference to the optimum, which would have a man and a woman involved [in raising a child].”

But Measure 36 is about more than family values. It brings up questions of civil rights, religious freedom, and the conservative agenda in the national election. It opens a can of worms that has very little to do with love.

Maintaining the Status Quo

Volunteers for the Defense of Marriage Coalition (DOMC) collected more than 240,000 signatures in six weeks — mostly by canvassing church groups — to put Measure 36 on Oregon’s Nov. 2 ballot. The coalition is led by Tim Nashif, Multnomah County chairman of the Oregon Republican Party and political director of the Oregon Family Council, a conservative advocacy organization that provides voters’ guides to thousands of the state’s Christian churches. According to DOMC Communications Director Georgene Rice, the Yes on 36 campaign is aiming for a budget of

about \$1.5 million by soliciting small contributions from individual Oregonians.

The pro-36 campaign bases its arguments on the idea that marriage — as defined as the union between one man and one woman — is time-tested and mother-approved. Tampering with that definition, say the measure’s supporters, will make marriage meaningless. “We believe that marriage has stood the test of time and needs to be preserved,” says Rice.

DOMC has a grudge against the Multnomah County commissioners, who on Mar. 3 of this year allowed the county to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The practice was immediately challenged in court. On Apr. 20, Multnomah County Circuit Judge Frank Bearden halted the issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples, but he ordered official recognition of the marriages already licensed and declared a state law that denies marriage rights to gay partners unconstitutional. A legal challenge to Bearden’s ruling is pending in the Oregon Supreme Court.

Supporters of Measure 36 want to put an

end to the legal debate over gay marriage by amending the state Constitution to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman. If the measure passes and survives court challenges, it is possible that the 3,000 marriage licenses already issued to same-sex couples in Oregon will become null.

The Yes on 36 campaign argues on its website that marriage between a man and a woman is “the way nature meant it to be,” and that children do best with one mother and one father. This is the argument that most moves Bell, who has been married for 35 years and has four married children.

Bell is uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex couples having children. “My heart tells me that it is probably not in the best interest of the child,” she says. She objects that if same-sex couples are able to marry, they will gain equal priority in adopting children. “I don’t think that unmarried individuals should have the same standing in the adoptive field as married couples who have established themselves and shown themselves to be responsible people,” she says. “I would prefer that married [heterosexual] couples have one step above unmarried couples.”

Bell worries that allowing same-sex marriage would degrade the very meaning of marriage. “If the definition of marriage were to be changed so that it could include two women or two men, why couldn’t it be changed to include two women and one man?” she asks. “Either we protect marriage as defined, or we lose it.”

Fighting Discrimination

The No on Constitutional Amendment 36 coalition comprises business leaders, religious people, community members and human-rights advocates as well as the ACLU, Planned Parenthood and Basic Rights Oregon (BRO). A petition opposing Measure 36 was signed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski, Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, five state senators and nine state representatives, among others. The campaign has a budget of \$2.9 million, six field offices and a volunteer force of about 5,000. Donors include the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign and more than 3,000 individual Oregonians.

The Eugene City Council recently passed a resolution against the measure by a 5-3 vote. “We feel that Measure 36 will do real harm to many Eugeneans, and that putting unequal treatment for gays and lesbians into the Constitution is completely at odds with

Resources

- **Religious Response Network PAC:** a Lane County-area network of people of faith who support the civil and religious rights of LGBT people and families. For more info, contact: (541) 343-0275

- **Love Makes a Family:** a Portland-based organization that publishes a bi-monthly newsletter dedicated to providing a public voice for LGBT families. www.lmfamil.org

- **Basic Rights Oregon:** a PAC committed to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation in Oregon. www.basicrights.org

- **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force:** the oldest national organization working for LGBT civil rights. www.thetaskforce.org

- **Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG):** a national organization of allies of LGBT people advocating for gay rights. www.pflag.org

Upcoming Events:

- “What Does Family Look Like?,” an art exhibit celebrating family diversity, will open on Friday, Oct. 1, from 5:30 to 8:30 pm at 35 West 8th Ave.

- RRN will hold a rally, “Religious Leaders Speak Out in Opposition to Constitutional Amendment 36,” at noon on Friday, Oct. 1 in the Park Blocks, Oak and 8th.