

LAW & JUSTICE

Group Emerges to Battle Anti-Gay Attacks

'We are your family, friends and neighbors,' advocates say

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

In a state where anti-gay ballot measures have periodically erupted in major political battles over the past 20 years, one organization has emerged as a tireless leader in fighting discrimination.

Founded in 1996, Basic Rights Oregon is the state's chief advocacy, education and political organization dedicated to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

"One of interesting things for Oregon is that our state has faced more anti-gay ballot measures than any other state," said Jeanna Frazzini, the executive director of Basic Rights Oregon. "But today we are ahead of most states in terms of protections that have been put in place."

The organization Basic Rights Oregon works against anti-gay attacks in all their forms—at the ballot, in local government, in the legislature, as well as works in close connection and partnership with the national LGBT rights movement.

The campaign to pass a law banning discrimination against sexual minorities began in 1973, and similar legislation has been introduced in every one of the 17 regular legislative sessions within the state throughout the past 34 years.

"BRO grew out of the community as a response to those ballot measures," said Frazzini. "There was a need for a hub within the community to organize campaigns so we could not only defend ourselves, but also advance our rights through pro-active efforts."

The vision was to organize community to stand up and say, 'we are your family, your friends, and your neighbors,' she said.

Today, BRO employs a full-time staff of 15 individuals at their two offices in both Portland and Eugene. With members throughout the state, the organization has 5,000 active volunteers and more than 10,000 contributors.

BRO's most recent legislative victory happened last week when the Portland City Council unanimously voted to end insurance exclusions against transgender city employees in front of a packed house. The organization has been

working on the campaign to end health care discrimination against transgender Oregonians for the past two-years.

"We commend the City of Portland for this important step to provide medically-necessary care to their employees," said Frazzini at the event. "We all know someone who has had medically-necessary care denied by an insurance company. Excluding a group of people from healthcare is wrong and discriminatory and must come to an end."

Portland is now the third municipality in the country to provide trans-inclusive care to their employees.

Frazzini said the LGBTQ community has seen a lot of success since both the Oregon Equality Act and the Oregon Fairness Act were passed in 2007.

The Equality Act, which is a statewide law, banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, while the Fairness Act, a statewide domestic partnership law, gave some recognition to the rights of same sex couples.

By the time those two laws were enacted, there were over a dozen cities with non-discriminatory ordinances.

"We have seen a lot of success," Frazzini said. "The laws created statewide protection in recent years, which has created a solid foundation for our current priorities."

However, the battle fighting discrimination against the LGBTQ community is far from over.

"Our first priority is to build the majority support for the freedom to marry in Oregon," she said. As a major educational campaign, BRO has been working intensely since 2009. "It is going very well," she said. "But in order to achieve this, it requires the vote of the people."

In 2004, the courts refused to take on their challenge against Measure 36, the initiative that banned gay marriage in the Oregon Constitution. It is important to note the Oregon Fairness Act falls short of the dignity of marriage for all, Frazzini said.

To put an end to the shouting match over the issue, BRO recently began an educational campaign to get Oregonians talking about what marriage means to everyone.

"It's about love, community, taking care of each other, in good times and bad," she said. "Our hope, with no vote pending, is that we could create a dialogue for people to really understand that excluding loving same-sex couples from marriage hurts real people and our commu-



PHOTO COURTESY OF BASIC RIGHTS OREGON

Members of the local LGBTQ community and Basic Rights Oregon advocate for local and state laws to end discrimination in Oregon based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

nity."

With the help of BRO, the Oregon Safe Schools Act passed in 2009 to fight bullying and harassment in schools to ensure all kids can learn in a safe environment. "This includes the community of color and disabled children," she said. "It is really about safety for all kids."

Frazzini explained their second priority supports their Racial Justice Alliance Building Program, which attempts to both centralize the leadership for the LGBTQ community, as well as educate the predominantly white community about racial justice and how to take action

in support for communities of color.

"The LGBTQ equality movement nationally and in Oregon has largely been a white-led movement," she explained. "We recognize as an organization committed to Justice, if we don't address the needs of the members of our community who are often the most vulnerable, we are not achieving our mission."

BRO works to develop leadership and provide resources for those within the community who face unique challenges. The organization fights to eliminate homophobia, transphobia and racism, as well as work on tuition equity.

"Our work is about understand-

ing that you don't achieve equality for LGBTQ Oregonians without racial equality and economic fairness," she said. "We come from every demographic, and we see our unique role in seeing how all of these issues have an impact on the community."

According to Frazzini, the organization has gotten quite a bit bigger in the last couple of years. "We have shifted from one campaign at a time Organization to a movement campaign organization," she said.

"This reflects our maturity as an organization," she said. "Ultimately campaigns will be won and lost, but we will continue working to create a truly just society."

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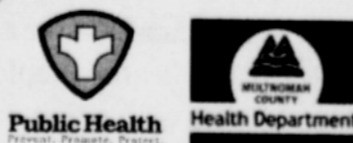
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