GAY POLITICS IN THE HEARTLAND

With the Lesbian Avengers in Idaho

SARA PURSLEY

Northern Idaho, fall 1994: a right-wing land in a right-wing time. Once the home of hundreds of radical Wobblies (and some of the country’s bloodiest labor suppressions), the region is currently infamous for housing the national headquarters of Aryan Nations. While it usually votes Democratic, its social conservatism is deeply entrenched and seems to be expanding. It is also one of the most rural areas in the country, with hundreds of logging, mining and farming towns scattered on small highways and dirt roads throughout ten counties. Enter Proposition One. Put forth on last November’s ballot by a Christian right group called the Idaho Citizens’ Alliance, Proposition One was a multipronged attack on lesbian and gay lives modeled after, but more extensive than, Colorado’s Amendment 2. The initiative, which was narrowly defeated on November 8, would have prohibited sexual orientation from being added to any antidiscrimination ordinances in the state, banned teachers and counselors from talking about homosexuality as “healthy” or “acceptable” and created adult-only sections in libraries for literature that “addresses” homosexuality. Among these mountain lakes and rolling wheat fields, it was an attack vicious enough to spark a lesbian and gay movement.

Dykes and fags fight back: In Moscow, a town of 18,000 set amid the wheat fields of the Palouse region, thirty-five lesbians and gay men gather at the Latah County fair for a Lesbian and Gay Freedom Picnic and hand out Hershey’s kisses with a card that says on the front, “How about a kiss instead?” and on the reverse side, “For the last twelve years, lesbians and gay men have been threatened, harassed and beaten at the Latah County Fair. STOP THE VIOLENCE. STOP THE HATE.” A month later, forty queers descend on Xenon, a traditionally homophobic and violent nightclub, for a Dance-In to take back the night. In Lewiston, a working-class timber town of 28,000, five lesbians and gay men hold a town forum to speak about living and growing up queer in Lewiston—the first time that lesbians and gay men in this town have ever gotten together publicly to come out. In Sandpoint, population 5,000, high school students dress up as their favorite lesbian and gay books for a street theater demonstration. In Genesee, a tiny farming town of 725, a lesbian distributes door to door a statement she has written about her life as the townspeople’s “lesbian neighbor.”

These are just a few of the grass-roots, pro-lesbian and pro-gay efforts that the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project...

Sara Pursley, a fourth-generation Idahoan recently transplanted to New York, is a founding member of the Lesbian Avengers Civil Rights Organizing Project.
Project (LACROP) supported in northern Idaho in response to Proposition One. LACROP, a working group of the New York Lesbian Avengers, was formed to support lesbian and gay activists in communities under siege by the Christian right. In 1993 the group sent three full-time activists to Lewiston, Maine, to battle a Christian right initiative to repeal the town’s antidiscrimination ordinance. The initiative passed by an alarming majority, but low-income, Catholic, socially conservative areas targeted by LACROP and local activists turned in some of the highest percentages of “no” votes in town. Last August LACROP was invited to Idaho by the newly formed Palouse Lesbian Avengers, and sent eight full-time and eight part-time lesbian organizers to work in the state through November.

LACROP set up shop in Moscow, and, according to Palouse Avenger Natalie Shapiro, “their little purple house on Jefferson Street became a de facto community center.” The group worked with the Palouse Lesbian Avengers, whose membership grew from four to twenty-five during LACROP’s stay, and organized direct actions focused on lesbian visibility and survival. They started the weekly Lesbian Avengers Radio Show, held fundraisers and organized the Freedom Picnic and the Dance-In at Xenon. LACROP also helped Voices for Human Rights in Moscow to coordinate grass-roots campaign efforts with a ragtag collection of lesbians, gay men and straight people outraged by Proposition One. These efforts included a door-to-door canvassing effort in which lesbians and gay men talked openly about their lives, a United in Diversity town rally, and the production of multi-message support signs for businesses and individuals (people could choose from a collection of messages, including “No Banned Books. No on One.” and “No Lesbian Bashing. No on One”).

From Moscow, LACROP spread out through the small mining, timber and farming towns of northern Idaho, adding new meaning to the Avengers’ motto “We Recruit.” The lack of a cohesive lesbian and gay community in most of the region forced some creative approaches. LACROP organizers attended labor and human rights meetings, wandered through food co-ops, interrupted high school theater rehearsals, visited Native American reservations and asked every dyke they met for more names and phone numbers. It was a challenging job in an area that had almost no infrastructure for progressive organizing of any kind (the entire 250-mile region houses only one domestic violence center and no abortion services).

On one recruiting trip to Lewiston, Chanelle Mathews and Michele Kelley of LACROP were hanging out in a straight bar (the only kind there is in northern Idaho) when their gaydar suddenly went off. After quick introductions and a traditional pickup line (“Do you know of a quieter bar?”), Chanelle and Michele were escorted by Anne Ersland and Ty Delacruz to a local dive, where they discussed lesbian life in Lewiston well into the night. One week later, Anne and Ty were helping other local lesbians and gay men plan a townwide literature drop of a brochure that talked openly about lesbian and gay lives, and a letter (negotiated by LACROP) from the Central Labor Council, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. affiliate in this overwhelmingly union town, urging voters to “Join Labor” in opposing “discrimination against lesbians and gay men in Idaho.”

Out of this effort, Lewiston’s first lesbian and gay organization was formed. It was a motley crew of dykes and fags recruited off the streets, from the high schools and out of the bars, who named themselves the Lewiston Lesbian and Gay Society and organized a town forum at which Anne, Ty and three others would come out. After the defeat of Proposition One, the group erected a gigantic 120-foot pink triangle on Lewiston Hill, which towers over the town, and subsequently organized a “cotillion” that attracted dozens of local lesbians and gay men in what was undoubtedly the beginning of a community. Anne says of these experiences, “I was just totally amazed to find out that there are people who really care about other lesbian and gay people. I feel like I’m alive, like I’m more real than I ever have been in my entire life.”

One reason LACROP is so successful in motivating lesbians and gay men is that it steadfastly avoids the volunteerist, one-message, highly centralized model of traditional political campaigns. In Idaho, that model was adopted by the No on 1 Coalition, formed by a predominantly lesbian and gay group in Boise that had been successfully organizing a network of loosely connected groups throughout the state since January 1993 (when the Idaho Citizens’ Alliance announced its petition drive). Last August, however, the Boise group hired a full-time staff and formulated a centralized campaign plan with technical and financial assistance (as well as full-time staff members) from the Human Rights Campaign Fund, Gay and Lesbian Americans and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The shift toward centralization and “message control” had many implications for people working on the Proposition One campaign. To become a volunteer in the Boise office of No on 1, for example, the applicant would have to sign a form stating that she would not talk to the press, write
articles or send in letters to the editor about Proposition One without approval from the executive committee. These rules were intended to “control the message,” and effectively precluded volunteers from promoting lesbian and gay visibility in the press. In rural areas, No on 1 tried to convince all local groups to give up their campaign PACs (which would mean they could not legally produce campaign literature) and send all their money to the Boise office.

LACROP organizers believe that this centralization and control of decision-making caused feelings of disempowerment and apathy among many rural lesbians and gay men. As Eileen Clancy explains, “People don’t ‘volunteer’ to save their own lives. Successful, long-term political movements are not formed by gathering a thousand recruits to lick postage stamps. LACROP’s strategy is to bring lesbians and gay men into the movement to share their ideas about what direction that movement should take.” At a time when most national gay organizations provide assistance only to centralized, hierarchical anti-initiative campaigns, LACROP provides invaluable resources to lesbian and gay people on a grass-roots level. While one of No on 1’s primary functions was to control the message, Elizabeth Meister of LACROP explains that “there were piles of literature all over our house, some we produced, like ‘Tips for Canvassing,’ or others we reproduced, like legal definitions of ‘minority status.’ Our goal was to produce information collectively, with input from the people whose lives were most affected.” A decentralized and grassroots approach is not the only difference LACROP has with traditional campaigns. The group requires that lesbian and gay visibility be integral to every local action and campaign project it works on. This requirement became extremely important in Idaho, where No on 1 television ads never mentioned the words “lesbian,” “gay” or even “homosexuality.”

The primary No on 1 messages were “No Government Intervention in Private Lives” and “Proposition One: It’s Expensive!” Christina McKnight of LACROP says, “People get really intimidated by polls and by self-proclaimed campaign ‘professionals.’ Polls always show that most straight people don’t like queers, which we know anyway, but what polls don’t recognize is the fact that the Christian right is talking about lesbian and gay people during the campaign. And whenever the Christian right is the only group talking about us, we are in trouble.”

Out-and-proud organizing in northern Idaho isn’t easy. LACROP members and local activists faced many slammed doors, as well as harassment and angry threats during canvassing efforts. Several local lesbians and gay men working with LACROP had their cars vandalized with graffiti, rotten eggs and threatening notes. And for every dyke recruited, a dozen others would decline out of fear—of losing their jobs and homes, of rejection by their families, of being harassed, of being killed. Yet activists received astonishingly little hassling at the most explicitly visible actions, such as the Latah County Freedom Picnic and the Xenon Dance-In, probably due to the large numbers of people involved. Lesbians and gay men who stayed in the closet may have been more vulnerable than those who came out. The worst known attack during the Proposition One campaign was the attempted firebombing of the
The entire state of Idaho (population 1 million) defeated Proposition One by 3,000 votes. The three counties targeted by LACROP (total population, 85,000) defeated it by almost 5,000 votes. As Chanelle Mathews says, "The work done in these counties proves that it is possible to win the initiative and do the right thing at the same time."

LACROP left northern Idaho on November 23, but the legacy of its work remains in the form of two Lesbian Avengers chapters (one in Moscow and a brand-new group in Coeur d'Alene), the Lewiston Lesbian and Gay Society, a Lesbian and Gay Rural Organizing Project, a pro-lesbian and pro-gay youth group at Sandpoint High School, and the seeds of an antiviolence project. The tremendous amount of energy and local expertise in these groups, combined with the crucial need for them in this region, gives them a good chance of survival.

And what about 1995? LACROP's Maxine Wolfe says, "We're watching the Christian right and we'll go wherever our support is needed to wage an out battle alongside lesbians and gay men in their own communities." And look for LACROP's "Out Against the Right" handbook, to be produced in early 1995, which will document the group's experiences and offer strategies for grass-roots organizing against the Christian right.

■ GULF WAR SYNDROME (CONT.)

A Lingering Sickness

LAURA FLANDERS

During the Gulf War, Maj. Gen. Ronald Blanck was director of professional services in the office of the Army's Surgeon General. He was in charge of formulating the Army's "medical operations" policy, he says. Now he is commander of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, one of two specialized care centers that on December 13 were granted up to $20 million between them for new research into "Gulf War Syndrome."

"Of paramount concern to us is the safety of our patients," Blanck said. He said the same thing about the soldiers under his care during the war. Back then he approved the use of pyridostigmine bromide, an experimental drug issued to soldiers as a "pretreatment" against the effects of a possible nerve gas attack. "We had plenty of studies on pyridostigmine dating back to 1955," Blanck said. "We knew we had an agent that would protect us." But on December 7, Jay Rockefeller, outgoing chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, listed pyridostigmine as one of three medications that may have caused the mysterious illness that is affecting tens of thousands of Gulf War personnel.

Unapproved for general use, the drug was acquired by the Department of Defense under a special waiver from the Food

Laura Flanders is working on a book about Gulf War Syndrome.