

LOCAL POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

I.

INTRODUCTION

Each community is different. Resources and the political environment vary. So too are organizations different. Each reflects the interests and personalities of the leaders and membership. Approaches and priorities will depend upon a number of factors.

The Gay Political Caucus has been in operation for a little over two years. We have made some serious mistakes, from which, hopefully, we have learned; but we have also had substantial success. We have a mailing list of over three thousand persons; have registered over 6,000 new voters; have raised over \$20,000.; have made our presence felt in municipal elections; have established important links with top officials in the offices of the police chief, mayor and other key officials in city government and have made ourselves into an important credible force in the Houston political community. Perhaps, some of what we have learned may be of value to other organizations.

II.

KEY FUNCTIONS OF GAY POLITICAL CAUCUS

After carefully evaluating the role we wished to play, we focused on three key areas for organizational activity: voter registration, candidate screening and voter education. Voter registration takes place prior to every regular election. Large numbers of volunteers fan out over the community and both register voters and add names to our mailing list. We go to large dance bars and to apartment buildings or wherever else there is a heavy concentration of gay persons. The results have been phenomenal.

Trained and experienced volunteers poll candidates using standardized questions to determine their attitudes toward gay rights. In order to forestall potential abuse, the leadership of GPC is not directly involved in recommending candidate endorsements to the Caucus. Final determination of endorsements is made by the general membership.

The release of our voter endorsement pamphlets is carefully timed so that our people will be able to receive the material just prior to the election, thus minimizing any potential backlash problems for the endorsed candidates. Over 10,000 pamphlets are distributed through mailings and through placement in locations frequented by gay people. Precinct judges have told us that a large number of voters in heavily gay areas carry these pamphlets into the voting booths with them.

III.

OTHER IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES OF GPC

We believe that it is necessary for us to work affirmatively to combat discrimination both within and without the gay community against persons as a result of their race, religion, sex or handicapped status. Discrimination against our gay sisters and brothers cannot be tolerated. We have taken a very hard line with facilities that fall within the coverage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and have threatened to file formal complaints with the Justice Department. We are proud of our involvement with the Rape Crisis Coalition and the Houston Feminist Credit Union. This policy is essential to maintain our credibility as a civil rights organization. Of our four officers nominated for the coming term, three will be minority persons, and we believe that they are the best persons for those positions.

We maintain close communication with the gay community. We have an emergency hot-line which is activated during times of crises and is staffed twenty-four hours a day. We have used this hot-line to help control dangerous rumors and to defuse potentially violent situations as well as to help mobilize for quick action. For special events, we have on occasion called all persons on our mailing list. In addition, we issue regular reports and financial statements to the gay press. Our office also operates as a referral service for those people who call seeking help on various matters.

We have recognized the importance of the fact that the organization may be called upon to respond to community problems with little advance time. Therefore, we attempt to be able to react to problems by having a special committee which is designed to be geared up for action with a minimum of elapsed planning time required. Thus, when Anita Bryant, fresh from her victory in Miami, was invited to Houston to entertain at the State Bar Convention, this group, working with a broad coalition of other gay groups, was able to mobilize a peaceful demonstration of over 10,000 persons in a few short weeks.

IV.

BASIC OPERATING PRINCIPLES

The most important basic operating principle that we have found is that our energy is limited. We must carefully evaluate our resources and determine which projects will have the highest priority. We attempt to formulate both long and short term goals and to maintain the necessary focus of energy to make meaningful progress toward implimenting those goals. We recognize that we cannot do everything. When new projects are proposed, we ask that people who wish for us to become involved in these new areas commit themselves to working on these new projects. The response to this approach has been very positive.

An organization must be larger than the personality of one or two leaders. Therefore, we have attempted to involve many people in the decision making process and to constantly recruit new members. We have made the posts of president and chair roughly equal, so that we can draw on the energies of two people. Our executive committee, consisting of our officers, plays a key role in making all policy. Board members are expected to serve liason roles with various segments of the community, and to become actively involved in committees work. All policy decisions are ultimately made by the Caucus in open meetings.

We are structured to operate under a system of collective leadership. Also, we attempt to rotate leadership roles and to bring new members into responsible positions. We attempt to have our volunteer coordinator match committees and interests with new members. We assign co-chairs to committees to test the abilities and leadership qualities of new supporters. We maintain a flexible organizational structure to be able to bring in new persons at all levels. We have found that titles are a necessary and effective way of satisfying the ego needs of dedicated workers.

We have worked very hard to cultivate an image of working within the system. We are a formal non-profit corporation with a state charter. We file all required I.R.S. forms and fulfill municipal permit requirements.

Our public litigating organization has applied for a tax exempt status. Similarly, when we deal with elected officials, civil servants or the press, we attempt to be fully briefed so that we can communicate effectively with a minimum of wasted time. Our approach is that we are reasonable people making legitimate requests. We dress and speak like the people whose help we are seeking. Confrontation is avoided.

V.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER LOCAL GROUPS

We encourage the formation of other groups within the gay community. Bar owners, bookstore operators, business people and so forth all have varying interests which they wish to protect. Those interests may not always be consistent with our views of what our constituency requires and we therefore encourage these persons to form special interest organizations to address their unique needs. We have worked together very satisfactorily on a number of issues of mutual interest. We believe that we are all stronger as a result of the existence of these groups.

We draw heavily on the pool of resources found in the gay community. We are forming strong liasons with all other major groups in the community. We are attempting to draw gay professionals and business people into our ranks to provide us with specialized skills. As with all other persons that we attempt to involve in GPC, we appreciate money they may donate but recognize and state that we also need their ideas. Also, we never ask any person to expose his or her homosexuality any more than he or she may choose. We do not in any way condemn those people who feel they have a need to closet their gayness. We assure such persons that they may play a meaningful role in our organization.

There are other political groups in Houston with differing approaches. We believe that we share the same basic goals though our methods may vary. On special task forces and projects such as anti-discrimination drives and the huge rally after the Miami election, we cooperated together on such tasks through special committees and coalitions. Similarly we are attempting to reach out to the black and Chicano communities to act in concert to obtain relief from police violence which is a serious community problem in Houston.

VI.

INTERFACE WITH NATIONAL GAY ORGANIZATIONS

We strongly support both the Gay Rights National Lobby and the National Gay Task Force. We have raised several thousand dollars for GRNL and signed up a large number of new members. We intend to do the same for NGTF. We have board members who play very active roles in both organizations. We firmly believe we must generate local support for the good works of those groups, and to communicate to them what local needs they can serve. We have learned from their experiences, and are trying to coordinate activities for a greater result. For example, we are currently promoting a local corporate anti-discrimination pledge drive, inspired by and coordinated with NGTF. We lobby Congresspersons and Senators in concert with GRNL.

We will continue to support national organizations with realistic goals and projects. We will not become involved in any infighting between such organizations. We will withhold support from any organization that acts divisively or engages in personality politics. We have too much to do to waste energy on such pettiness.

VII.

THE FUTURE

We wish to continue to build a strong local organization on what we feel is a strong and solid foundation. We want to expand our focus as we generate more support. We will continue to impress upon the citizens of Houston, its elected officials, civil servants and the media, that our cause is just.

We look to the national arena for better communication channels. We must educate the general public to the fact that civil rights for all persons, regardless of sexual or affectional preference, is an idea whose time has come. United we can achieve that goal.

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