

## Sudden impact

by Ethan Jacobs  
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The afternoon of Nov. 23 was bitterly cold, with temperatures in the 20s and steady, biting winds, but that didn't dissuade a crowd of about 60 people from assembling in front of Cambridge City Hall for the latest local Join The Impact rally against California's Proposition 8.

As in the two previous Boston-area rallies - one in Cambridge Nov. 9 that drew about 80 people, and a massive Nov. 15 rally on Boston City Hall Plaza that drew about 4000 - a parade of speakers exhorted the crowd to stand up for justice, and people in the audience cheered and brandished homemade signs. But one speaker, MassEquality Executive Director Marc Solomon, told the crowd that it was time to move beyond protesting the passage of California's anti-gay amendment and to start directing their energy to creating real political change. Join The Impact, an online LGBT activist network launched by two activists in their 20s after the passage of Prop 8, organized a series of rallies in cities across the country Nov. 15 that brought out thousands of people to protest against Prop 8.

"I've been to a No On 8 rally in the Castro in San Francisco, and I've been to a No On 8 rally at City Hall in Boston, and this is the last No On 8 rally I'm going to, because what we need to do is we need to say yes, yes to stopping transgender discrimination and passing the transgender civil rights bill in Massachusetts. And we need to say yes to passing marriage equality in Vermont and New Jersey and in New York and in Maine. And that can all happen this year, in 2009, with your help," Solomon told the crowd through a bullhorn.

He urged people to gear up for "the truly hard work" of changing the minds of lawmakers and the public.

"I'm inviting all of you to come to our office at MassEquality and get on the phones and talk to voters and tell them why they need to talk to their legislators about transgender equality. And get on the phones and also join us and take busses up to Vermont and talk to people in Vermont about why we need marriage equality up there," said Solomon. "There's a lot of hard work that needs to be done, and it's time to get on the bus, get on the phone, and do the truly hard work of winning equality legislator by legislator, state by state."

Activist Chris Mason, one of the lead organizers of the local Join The Impact Massachusetts group, told Bay Windows that the group is working to take the momentum of the Boston rally and create a grassroots network to mobilize for LGBT causes in Massachusetts. He said volunteers collected about 2000 postcards from attendees at City Hall - about half of the people estimated to have taken part - pledging their support for the transgender rights bill. Mason said the group would be delivering those postcards to the legislature and using the contact information from the postcards and from people who have signed up on their website, [jointheimpactma.com](http://jointheimpactma.com), to organize future action.

"I feel like what our group, Join The Impact, will be good at, is mobilizing people," said Mason. "We are in tune with the Facebook generation and know how to get people motivated. And MassEquality can put in place specific places for us to drive people to. They can have a phone bank where they have 25 phone lines to fill for transgender rights, and we can be the organization

that gets people there."

In the week since Join The Impact organized a series of Nov. 15 protests against Prop 8 there has been much chatter among LGBT activists and bloggers about whether the fledgling grassroots network had rewritten the rules of LGBT activism. Join the Impact is the brainchild of two young activists who met in college, Amy Balliett of Seattle and Willow Witte of Cleveland, who began e-mailing about organizing a response to Prop 8 after Election Day. They launched a website, [jointheimpact.com](http://jointheimpact.com), on Nov. 7 and encouraged people to organize protests and rallies on Nov. 15 to send a unified message of opposition to Prop 8 and the other anti-gay ballot measures that passed that day. That day in cities all across the country, from Boston to Seattle to New York to Chicago, not to mention all across California, many thousands of people took to the streets.

The size of the protests, combined with the speed with which they were organized, prompted some activists and media figures to argue that the protests represented a new direction for LGBT activism in which the established professional LGBT advocacy organizations are sidelined and the grassroots, connected by Facebook and wikis and Twitter, would take the lead in driving the LGBT movement agenda. Activist/blogger Wayne Besen recently wrote that prior to Prop 8's passage most LGBT organizations asked members for money and little else. The Join The Impact protests, said Besen, "mark the end of the Passive Era of gay politics" and are "a paradigm shift." Gay journalist Rex Wockner dubbed Join The Impact "Stonewall 2.0" and accused Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the No on Prop 8 campaign of practicing "failed corporate activism." Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of the progressive blog Daily Kos, wrote, "These nationwide protests are a watershed moment of sorts - the moment when the gay community realized that it had the power to fight for change on its own, and didn't require any of its so-called, self-appointed 'leaders' to give them permission to engage."

But Solomon isn't the only one calling on the people who have taken to the streets to get involved in more concrete forms of activism. Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank said that the protests alone do nothing to promote marriage equality. Depending on the situation in their home state people could get involved in a number of activities to further LGBT rights, including lobbying, fundraising, or reaching out to communities such as the African American community, which according to exit polls strongly supported Prop 8, said the openly gay Democrat.

"It's a neutral sign unless people give them something useful to do. Now in New York they can lobby state senators. There's a real chance now with what happened with the state Senate in New York to get a marriage bill through the New York legislature. There should be an intense campaign of constituent lobbying there," said Frank, referring to the new equality-minded Democratic majority in the Empire State Senate.

He said he worried that the protests could potentially do harm if people use them to express anger against people who voted for Prop 8.

"To the extent that you're engaged in a difficult political fight and you're doing things that make you feel really good, they're probably not all that effective. ... There was a story I started to read that while there was some dissension within the Mormon Church about their role, some of the anger of the attacks on the Mormon Church are uniting the church again. That's an example of not being politically wise," said Frank.

**Sue Hyde, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference, which trains community leaders and activists, said she believes Join The Impact can play a key role in revitalizing the role of the grassroots in national LGBT politics. Locally and nationally the community relies both on established LGBT advocacy organizations and grassroots support, said Hyde, and the Massachusetts marriage victory is one success story of the interplay between those two types of groups. In that instance groups like MassEquality managed to get the grassroots supporters involved in ways that furthered the cause. Hyde said, "We would not have won on June 14, 2007, without the**

**kind of grassroots energy and support that came from people who stood in front of the State House, who visited their legislators, who wrote letters to their community newspapers, and who spoke about it with their family and their coworkers," said Hyde, a MassEquality board member. "The inside work of politics must be supported by a strong grassroots movement on the outside, and those two dynamics can work together to ensure that we achieve our political goals," said Hyde.**

Witte said the national Join The Impact network has no immediate plans to partner with any established organizations, although she said she and Balliett have been in contact with some of the national LGBT groups. Witte said it was too early to speak publicly about the discussions and declined to name the groups involved.

In the short term, said Witte, Join The Impact will continue to focus on public demonstrations and protests, like the Dec. 10 Day Without a Gay event, in which Join The Impact is urging its supporters to refrain from buying anything and showing the importance of LGBT people to the health of the economy. On Dec. 5 the group is directing supporters to go see the new Harvey Milk biopic, *Milk*, to try to make the film one of the top three grossing films in the country that weekend. Later that month, on Dec. 20, Join The Impact will hold its Light Up the Night event, in which it is asking supporters to hold candlelight vigils outside of busy shopping areas to create visibility during the holiday shopping rush.

But Witte said the group would also branch out by doing events focused on building bridges between the LGBT community and other communities. The first event is an in-progress food drive, which will culminate on Dec. 20 to coincide with Light Up the Night. Witte said Join The Impact is asking people to organize food drives in their community and to give the goods to a diverse range of organizations that take food donations, including religious organizations that have historically opposed LGBT rights.

"The idea is we want people to be giving the food that they've gathered to a variety of sources, not only churches that have food banks that are queer-affirming but also churches that have food banks that aren't necessarily allies at this point. ... It encourages those bridges to be made, and it basically says, it's the holidays, we care about hunger as much as you do, and we're not only going to help out people who have helped us in the past," said Witte. "It's one way to think about outreach into communities that don't see us except for in the media."

**Hyde thinks it's a good idea.**

**"It highlights for a non-LGBT population that our folks are concerned with aspects of quality-of-life in communities that goes beyond LGBT issues. I thought it was a wonderful community service idea," said Hyde.**

Over the long term Witte said Join The Impact plans to expand its outreach work. She would like to see the network organize formal trainings for members in doing outreach to different communities. But there are no immediate plans to do so, she said. Prior to Nov. 6, Witte said she and Balliett had no idea they would be at the forefront of a protest movement encompassing thousands of people, and for now they are trying to keep the people who turned out on Nov. 15 energized by giving people the chance to participate in events like the boycott and the food drive. In contrast to the established LGBT rights movement, Witte said many of the events they have planned came from the grassroots. For instance, she noted that two different people contacted her and Balliett to suggest the Day Without a Gay event.

As for the claims by bloggers that Join The Impact renders groups like HRC obsolete, Witte disagrees. She said she and Balliett did not launch Join The Impact to replace groups like HRC, **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and Lambda Legal. Echoing Hyde, she said she believes both the grassroots and the professionalized LGBT movement have important roles to play.

"I think that the groups that have been established already do have ways that work. They do have established channels already that are in place. We should be working together," said Witte. "I think we need to work together, and not necessarily to plan events together, but to complement each other. ... And I think it needs to happen because we have common goals, and any sort of division in our community can only hurt us."