

No on Prop 8 'regrets' tour hits Denver confab

by Zak Szymanski
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Soon after hiring the Dewey Square political consulting firm to lead the fight against Proposition 8, members of the No on 8 executive committee knew something was wrong with the firm's messaging and approach.

"We should have fired some people really fast early on," said Lorri Jean, CEO of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, speaking at a No on 8 debriefing panel on Saturday, January 31.

The panel was part of the annual Creating Change conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, held this year in Denver. In addition to Jean, panel members included Equality California Executive Director Geoff Kors, National Center for Lesbian Rights Executive Director Kate Kendell, Jordan Rustin Coalition Board President Ron Buckmire, API Equality Director Tawal Panyacosit, and **NGLTF director of organizing and training Daniel Hawes**. All except Buckmire were members of the No on 8 executive committee.

Describing their reactions to early No on 8 media messages as being "completely underwhelmed," Jean and others said additional problems included a lack of community-building and handing too much over to experts who failed to tap the energy and stories of LGBT families. Anecdotal evidence from some smaller LGBT groups suggests that many were told to stay silent because their particular stories didn't poll well.

If she could do it over, said NCLR's Kendell, "I would have been more of an asshole," she said. "I would have been more aggressive about where I felt like things could have been done differently. It didn't have to be 'community-building versus a win.' There was a way to do both."

Even so, the groups worried that if they ignored the expert advice and Proposition 8 passed, there would be an uproar. Additionally, finding new experts who were actually available during a high-stakes election seemed impossible.

"I'm not a campaign expert, so you end up listening to what your campaign experts tell you," said Kendell. "That would be just one example where, you just know, instinctually, it doesn't seem right."

The experience has raised the question of whether such campaigns should be structured differently, valuing more involvement from people who don't have campaign experience, while still being able to raise enough money.

Typically, big donors prefer expert-run, victory-driven campaigns, most of which have been unsuccessful at defeating anti-gay marriage initiatives. But panelists said more community involvement could lead to less dependence on bigger donors, and at the very least, a loss would also build stronger networks and infrastructure for the future. That \$40 million, said Jean, referring to money raised by No on 8, may have been better spent on the community itself. Campaign finance reports made public this week showed that No on 8 raised \$43.3 million last year.

"One of the things we need to be thinking about is: Is it worth it to try something completely different and maybe say, 'OK, we're not going for victory; we're going for long-term community-building,'" said Jean, a former executive director of NGLTF. "What we learned in California is we're not going to be so dependent on big funders if we can get the community to rise up and donate early, or a lot earlier than they did in this campaign."

"Will the community accept that [approach]? Maybe we'll lose, but maybe we'll advance the ball further than we did," Jean said.

Unlike the failed No on 22 campaign of 2000, said Panyacosit, No on 8 did invest in a statewide field operation. The effort built a volunteer list of 60,000 people statewide, he said, and 13,000 of them showed up at least once for a volunteer shift to call voters. Those calls resulted in a list of 132,000 supporters to call upon for the future.

Accountability

Despite campaign regrets, "I don't think we could have won Prop 8," said Kendell, noting that support for same-sex marriage dropped 14 points after couples starting getting married.

"Seeing us getting married freaked people out," she said, adding that the answer is to increase – not decrease – those images and stories.

The No on 8 media campaign has been criticized, much like the No on 22 campaign, for not featuring same-sex couples or explicitly addressing same-sex marriage.

Since the election, Proposition 8 campaign debriefings have been held across the country; in California, No on 8 organizers have sometimes been met with hisses and boos from the LGBT community. Kors and Kendell have been absent from such events in San Francisco; Kors said he and Kendell attempted to attend one hosted by Marriage Equality USA but were told the event was canceled. That event was rescheduled for a date she was out of town, said Kendell, who has been tied up in legal challenges against Prop. 8. But, she said, "I'd be happy to attend anything else that was organized."

The debriefing at Creating Change attracted LGBT people from around the country who mostly expressed their gratitude and congratulations to California leaders, who saw an unprecedented narrow defeat of just a few percentage points.

But some audience members wanted accountability. Richard Kim, an associate editor at the *Nation* magazine, asked if and when a detailed report of the No on 8's spending and decision-making process would be available. Kors said an account of the \$43 million spent was available on the secretary of state's Web site, and that "a full, independent analysis" is in progress. (That same day, San Francisco activist Michael Petrelis blogged about a blog post by reporter Karen Ocamb that the analysis is being conducted by Michael Fleming. Petrelis noted that Fleming is one of the 16 members of the No on 8 executive committee.)

Another audience member noted that people of color seemed to play a minimal role in the campaign, and that their presence on the panel appeared to be tokenistic.

Not about rights

Some in the crowd also expressed frustration with the inability of No on 8 organizers to imagine messages that weren't defensive.

For instance, in one Yes on 8 commercial, a little girl told her mother, "Guess what I learned in school? I can marry a princess." No on 8 responded with an ad denying that schools were required to teach marriage, which worked well, said Kors, until some San Francisco parents took a first-grade class to wait for their lesbian teacher and her partner, who were getting married by Mayor Gavin Newsom in City Hall. But one audience member said that a better response ad would have affirmed the idea of girls marrying princesses, contrasting that school lesson with school violence against children and asking voters: Which would they rather have?

Messaging is especially difficult in a state like California, where registered domestic partners have virtually all the same in-state rights and responsibilities as married couples. Until federal marriage is a reality, that limits California's ability to make a credible rights-based case for state marriage, but Kors said that was not a goal of the campaign.

"None of our messaging was about differences in rights. That's not what marriage is about ... it's about love, it's about dignity, it's about acceptance, it's about respect," said Kors. "That was sort

of where we were going, that was our original thing. We had parents talking about their daughter getting married. It wasn't about eliminating the rights; it was about eliminating that joy."

But emphasizing the moral or symbolic importance of the m-word could alienate some religious and unmarried families, both of which make up a large segment of potential voters. Discussing the latter group, Jean offered her own version of a response to the princess ad, to much laughter and applause:

"Here's the message I wanted to see. ... 'You're right honey, you can marry a princess, and isn't that wonderful? You can also marry someone of [a different] race. And you know what, you don't have to get married; in fact I think you should consider whether you want to participate in that patriarchal institution.'"

Jean wasn't the only one at **Creating Change** calling for pro-marriage messages that were nontraditional and spoke to the reality of many American families. Featured panelists stressed the importance of non-apologetic messaging, building coalitions, and opening up legal and social possibilities for all people.