

No on Prop 8 admits mistakes

by Seth Hemmelgarn
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An estimated 400 people gathered in San Francisco last week to talk about the work that lies ahead on marriage equality, and to vent their frustrations with officials from the No on Prop 8 campaign – a chance many local activists and others had been calling for since shortly after Prop 8 passed in November.

Senior members of the No on 8 campaign, including campaign manager Steve Smith; executive committee members Kate Kendell, Geoff Kors, Tawal Panyacosit, and **Dan Hawes**, listened for more than two hours as community leaders, LGBTs, and straight allies repeatedly criticized many aspects of the campaign.

Reacting to a common complaint that would-be volunteers were given the brush-off by organizations such as the National Center for Lesbian Rights that were calling for help, Kendell, the executive director of that agency, simply said, "I'm sorry. That shouldn't have happened. It's inexcusable."

But the panelists also pointed out that conversations with people who may not agree with same-sex marriage have to start now. Many at the February 26 town hall at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium agreed.

"It's hard to prepare for a hurricane in the middle of a hurricane," said Kendell, referring to the effort made during the campaign to have those difficult conversations. "We have to have difficult conversations now, and now work leading up to the fight so that we are prepared for the fight."

Many in the crowd stressed the importance of being out, especially when it comes to campaign ads. Another common complaint was that the script used by phone bank volunteers was void of any reference to gay people and "felt false," as community member Emily Drennen put it.

But local blogger Michael Petrelis, who Assemblyman Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) acknowledged from the stage for pushing for the forum to happen, decried the fact that the current "I Do' support the freedom to marry" campaign – organized by the Equality California Institute's Let California Ring campaign – doesn't make it clear that the campaign is about same-sex marriage. Similar criticism by Petrelis and others had hounded the No on 8 campaign.

Petrelis encouraged the crowd to chant, "No more closets!" and was met with a moderate response.

Audience member Vicky Kolakowski also criticized the tactic of leaving gays and lesbians out of television ads because they made undecided voters uncomfortable. The campaign had largely left out LGBTs out of ads after meetings with focus groups. Only some images of same-sex couples were shown in the closing days of the campaign.

But Kolakowski said people in the "movable middle" – swayable, undecided voters – "are going to be uncomfortable until they know us."

She then asked how many of the 30 campaigns across the country that dealt with constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage had been won.

"We haven't won one," Hawes acknowledged, except an initial vote in Arizona in 2006 that was reversed by voters in November 2008.

"That movable middle is getting a lot more comfortable," Smith added.

At least some in the crowd felt that groups like EQCA shouldn't be given more of the community's money.

Facing the audience, Rem Melton said, "We can't let people like the people behind me get away with flushing 45 million fucking dollars down the toilet!" Melton, who was referring to the approximate amount of money raised by the No on 8 campaign, said that he is starting a "central depository" for gay organizations.

Rebecca Rolfe, executive director of San Francisco's LGBT Community Center, also mentioned the importance of spending money carefully. Rolfe urged everybody to think about how the community will be able to sustain another marriage equality campaign, while so many local organizations are in need of financial support.

Consultants

One topic that got a strong reaction from the audience was the involvement of campaign consultants. Smith, a principal in Dewey Square, was discussing the decision to air an ad featuring the voice of actor Samuel L. Jackson talking about discrimination, rather than another ad featuring an out lesbian, when co-moderator Kim Corsaro, publisher and editor of the *San Francisco Bay Times*, asked who made that decision.

Smith said a committee comprised of him and five other consultants had been making decisions at that point in the campaign, just weeks before the election. Kors added that no executive committee members had been present when this happened. There were only two out gay people and one woman in that group, Smith and Kors said.

Asked about the exchange in an e-mail, Kors responded that Patrick Guerriero, who had taken leave from his job at the Gill Action Fund to work as No on 8's campaign director during the month before Election Day, had full decision-making authority for all aspects of the campaign.

"There was a team of consultants involved in creating, testing, and recommending ads to Patrick. The executive committee was not involved in that process" during October and November, wrote Kors in an e-mail.

He added, "Patrick kept the executive committee updated and sought input from a large number of people based on their particular experience and expertise. For example, EQCA was focused primarily on fundraising and creating the fundraising e-mails."

Kors also wrote, "The executive committee was not making the day-to-day decisions. We were the legal board of the campaign."

At the forum, Kors said turning the campaign over to the consultants was "a huge mistake."

Smith also acknowledged that the campaign should have used then-presidential candidate Barack Obama's stated opposition to Prop 8. Instead, little use was made of Obama's opposition in a letter last June to the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club, and right before Election Day the Yes on 8 campaign sent out a mailer featuring Obama's image and quotes that he is opposed to same-sex marriage.

"That was a close call," Smith said. "Maybe we should have."

Smith said that people outside the Bay Area wouldn't know what the Alice Club was, but club Co-Chair Susan Christian spoke up and said that in fact, Obama's letter to the club been widely reported, including in the *New York Times*.

"I think we lost this campaign because of an approach that didn't recognize 'we are everywhere,'" Christian said.

During one part of the forum, Kendell said if she could do the campaign over, she'd throw the doors open so "anybody who wants to do anything, whatever they want, wherever they want," could do it.

Smith said this would be good until about a month out from Election Day, but then it would be time to get more organized.

Smith also said that he'd had to be "dragged across the line" in the move to release internal polling numbers that showed the No on 8 campaign trailing badly – going against traditional campaign strategy – but said it was "the right thing to do" and the campaign immediately received an infusion of cash.

Kendell said during the forum, "I'm never going to be involved in another campaign," noting that she's a lawyer, not a campaigner, and there were too many people like her during the campaign who were "playing out of position."

Later, in a phone interview with the *Bay Area Reporter*, Kendell explained, "I do not think I am a campaign expert, and I should not be in a strategic or oversight role" in a future campaign.

While NCLR will need to be part of fundraising, mobilization, and public education, Kendell said that neither she nor any other executive director of the organization should be on a leadership committee such as the No on 8 executive committee.

Kendell said she doesn't know what a new structure would be like if another campaign is waged, but whatever structure there is, there needs to be "much closer oversight than we did. [It] shouldn't include, from my perspective, more than a handful of movement leaders, and even then, those folks should have demonstrated campaign or grassroots experience, in my opinion."

Asked about Kendell's comments, Kors said in an interview, "I think every campaign is different, and figuring out the right structure, if there does need to be a future campaign, is going to be critical."

It's premature to say exactly how any new campaign should be structured, but looking at the structure of this campaign and other statewide social issue ballot initiatives "that have had a coalition element ... is going to be very important," said Kors.