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Race in the “Other” West
The Organizing Challenge in a Changing Region

SOYA JUNG HARRIS AND TARSO LUIS RAMOS

When people speak of race in “the West,” they’re usually referring to California or the Southwest. But the West includes more than land grabbed from Mexico. This Other West includes the northwestern coastal states of Washington, Oregon and Alaska; mountain states like Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Utah; and the Great Basin state of Nevada.

It’s an area that usually figures outside discussions on race. There is a widely held perception both within and outside this region that, as one of the whitest parts of the country (about 20% people of color overall*), racial justice issues here are somehow less pressing. In many ways just the opposite is true: the need for racial justice organizing is especially intense here precisely because communities of color are smaller, diverse, isolated from each other and more effectively marginalized by the dominant community.

Whether it’s hate group activity (the

* Census figures calculate that 84% of the region’s residents are “white.” However, Census figures regard many “Hispanics” as “white,” one of the factors contributing to an undercount of people of color. Just by counting Latin@as as people of color increases the estimated regional POC population from 16% to about 20%.

Northwest has long been hailed as a “white homeland” by the far right); police violence (the Portland, Oregon, Police Department uses deadly force at a higher rate than the NYPD); gentrification and displacement (Seattle’s last black neighborhood is in the final stages of colonization); Native sovereignty and treaty rights; or a host of other issues, race looms large in and for the “Other” West.

The Great White North(west)
The mountain West is known for its live-and-let-live ethos and the Pacific Northwest—Oregon and Washington—has long been considered a liberal stronghold. But consider this: bigots and white supremacists from this region head not only for the hills but also to the Hill. Washington’s Jack Metcalf led the anti-Indian movement as an activist, state legislator and, ultimately, a federal Representative. His contemporary, Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) fought tribal treaty rights as state Attorney General and then used his Senate position to propose that Congress eliminate tribal sovereignty altogether. Those are just two of many examples. And, as many organizers are quick to point out, our elected bigots are even more colorful at the state and local levels.

The Other West’s conservative racial politics and white electoral majorities have made the region attractive to right-wing groups seeking to mainstream their racist agendas. A decade of Christian Right campaigns against “special rights” (i.e. civil rights protections) for lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people helped soften the ground for a more recent round of racialized attacks. In just the past four years, English-only ballot initiatives were passed in Alaska and Utah; Washington voters repealed state-based affirmative action programs, framed by opponents as “special rights” for black people; and state legislatures across the region have offered up a barrage of racist attacks, from dismantling bilingual education to Proposition 187-style anti-immigrant bills.

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Idaho, Oregon and Washington are among the fastest growing states in the country and most of that population growth represents migration from other US cities. In the 1990s, high-tech industries drove a booming economy and high-wage jobs at the likes of Microsoft, Intel and Hewlett-Packard lured many thousands to what became known as the Silicon Forest. The “quality of life” here—natural beauty, recreational opportunities, “livable” cities, and, it seems, whiteness—is also a significant pull factor for businesses and people fleeing big cities (especially in California) with large and growing communities of color.

It must come as a disturbing surprise to many of these new arrivals that the Great White North(west) looks increasingly like the places they fled. While it will be a long time before people of color are a majority in Washington (never mind Wyoming), communities of color overall are rapidly outpacing white growth—by nearly five to one. Across the region, Latin@s are the fastest growing racial group; in Oregon, the community expanded by 140% in just the last decade. The African-American and Native communities are generally holding steady and, especially in the Pacific Northwest and Nevada, the Asian/Pacific Islander population is rapidly increasing. By 2025 people of color stand to make up well over 25% of the region’s population, as compared to roughly 20% in 2000.

Race in the Region

After leading the successful campaign to dismantle affirmative action in California, businessman Ward Connerly brought his crusade to Washington. Of any state in the Other West, Washington would seem the most likely to reject such cynical race baiting. It has the largest population of color in the region (well above one million individuals) and a history of electing people of color to prominent positions. Norm Rice, an African-American, was elected mayor of Seattle and King County Executive Ron Sims—who is also black—hopes to replace Chinese-American Governor Gary Locke, currently in his second term. Still, the 1998 anti-affirmative action campaign passed by a definitive 60/40 margin at the ballot box.

While this was an electoral campaign, it surfaced many of the chronic challenges racial justice organizers face in the Other West. To name just a few: • Doing the White Thing vs. The Right Thing. Very few predominantly white social justice groups weighed in during the affirmative action ballot fight. For the same ballot, organized labor and its allies turned out voters to support a measure increasing Washington’s minimum wage. That initiative passed with 60% of the vote—the margin by which Affirmative Action was rejected. Obviously support for working-class struggles does not go hand-in-hand with support for racial justice.

The demographic realities of the region mean that, to be successful, most campaigns (unless they’re strictly local) will need a strategy for building alliances with white organizations. While this is true to varying degrees in most parts of the country, building effective alliances from positions of strength is a particular challenge for racial justice organizers in the Other West.

• A Culture of Activism and Advocacy. While present in some areas, the national organizing networks have not had the impact on organizing culture here that they’ve had in the Midwest or some other places around the country. Most community organizations are home grown and independent, and few organizers have apprenticed in a successful organizing model. Too few community organizations are engaged in base-building on any scale.

• Lack of Infrastructure. In addition to limited organizing infrastructure, people of color-led groups lacked the experience to lead a statewide voter organizing campaign. In this context, the inevitable tensions between community and electoral organizing approaches became racialized, with a white-led “no” campaign (whose approach was to win over middle-class white women) and various POC-led community education and voter registration efforts.

• Absence of Multi-racial People of Color Organizing. In a region where the small, diverse and isolated nature of communities of color would seem to make alliance-building a strategic priority, there are in fact few people of color organizing projects.

• The Rest of the Country Takes a Pass. Some expected substantial support from national organizations and donors. That aid never arrived. The Other West simply doesn’t register or rate in the minds of most racial justice supporters outside the region. Local chapters of national civil rights organizations are generally small and receive limited resources from their national offices.

Despite these and other difficulties, racial justice organizers in the Other West are fighting and winning important victories. The racial realities of the region have

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shaped their approaches to making change and their experiences contain critical lessons for all who struggle for racial justice. (For some inspiring examples of these struggles, check out a longer version of this article at: www.westernstatescenter.org/programs/race.html; and see other articles in this Newsletter.)

Finding Dollars for Change

Changing racial demographics are altering the landscape for progressive movement-building and political strategies everywhere in the country. So-called “minority majority” cities and states have drawn the most attention. Among the challenges facing RESIST and other social change funders is how to find resources for critical racial justice organizing beyond New York City, Los Angeles, Miami and other global cities of the United States.

Racial justice organizers in the Other West struggle against the widely held notion that the Northwest is brimming over with new philanthropic resources. Certainly there is new money here, including family foundations created by high-profile technology moguls like Bill Gates and Paul Allen that are supporting very worthy causes. However, it would be wrong to assume that these resources are sufficient to meet the needs of the Northwest.

At the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, funding in the Pacific Northwest represents roughly 7.6% of the foundation’s total grantmaking since its inception. In keeping with the foundation’s mission, over half of its total funding has gone overseas to global health initiatives. Like most funders nationally, the Gates Foundation prioritizes direct services over institutional change. As a result, while critical social service programs in communities of color have benefited, grassroots activist organizations in those communities are still left to compete for national funding.

At the national level, two major challenges face racial justice organizations in the Northwest. The first is the overall decline of US philanthropic support for institutions and causes directly addressing race. In its recent report, “The State of Philanthropy 2002,” the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy explains that the decline occurred despite an increase in overall giving:

The Foundation Center’s analysis of trends in giving from 1980 through 1999 puts grantmaking for racial and ethnic minorities at 7.9 percent, down from 9.9 percent in the previous year. Despite a 20 percent increase in foundation giving between 1998 and 1999, grants for racial and ethnic minorities declined not simply proportionally, but in absolute terms—from $962 million to $918 million. Between 1998 and 1999, the total grantmaking of the 1,016 foundations in the Foundation Center analysis for African-American/Black causes and organizations dropped by more than one-third, from $367 million to $222 million.

The second challenge is more particular to the Northwest. According to the Foundation Center’s analysis of over 1,000 large US foundations, the top 10 states receiving foundation grant dollars in 2001 were: California, New York, District of Columbia, Massachusetts, Texas, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Georgia, and Maryland. While California and New York together claim one third of the total foundation grant dollars nationally, Maryland and Georgia each receive about three percent. In comparison, according to the same analysis, the five Northwest states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming together received about 3.7 percent of the nation’s total foundation dollars.

The Other West often illustrates another old adage, “necessity is the mother of invention.” This is apparent in the unique organizing models developed by grassroots organizations here, but it can also be seen today in the field of philanthropy, as an emerging network of philanthropists provides new hope for the future of racial justice funding in the region.

In recent years, the number of people of color working within the field of philanthropy in the Northwest has increased dramatically, leading to the creation of the People of Color in Philanthropy network in 2002. This multiracial network meets quarterly and includes individuals working either as staff at foundations or as advocates in their communities on issues of philanthropy. It includes over 60 participants from a wide range of funding organizations with a broad array of perspectives and approaches to philanthropy, and provides a forum for people of color to unite on strategies to advance racial justice through philanthropy.

Balancing Funding Priorities

The challenge for foundations, as always, is how to balance competing issues, geographic areas, constituencies, etc. when evaluating funding proposals. As a regional foundation funding social justice work in the Northwest, A Territory Resource has ongoing internal conversations about how to support isolated rural-based communities of color, antiracist organizing in white rural communities, and urban-based racial justice work—all with limited dollars.

In 1999 ATR created new funding criteria to reflect our grantmaking priorities through a comprehensive scoring system. It uses five criteria, each weighted differently, with very specific questions to guide committee members in their scoring. The five criteria are, in order of weight: Program; Diversity; Organizational soundness; Collaboration; Funding access.

In addition, up to 10 points are awarded automatically to groups working in rural parts of the region, so even if an urban group scored well on all five criteria, its maximum score would be 90 out of a possible 100. ATR also ensures that all organizations led by people of color receive a site visit, unless the committee unanimously screens them out. (Some of us still insist on taking affirmative action!)

In these challenging times, progressive funders like ATR and RESIST must make increasingly difficult choices, as economic and political pressures create greater need and more competition for foundation dollars. One important way to ensure that these choices meet the needs of social change organizations as equitably as possible is to consider the severe challenges facing under-resourced geographic areas like the Other West. Racial justice work outside major metropolitan areas demands a closer look, and merits greater support from national funding institutions.

Soya Jung Harris is Grant Manager for A Territory Resource Foundation. Tarso Luis Ramos is Field Director for the Western States Center. Both organizations serve social justice organizing in a multi-state region of the “other” West. For more information, contact ATR, 603 Stewart Street, Suite 1007, Seattle, WA 98101-1264; www.atrfoundation.org; and Western States Center, PO Box 40305, Portland, OR 97240, www.westernstatescenter.org.
Montanans Fight the Radical Right  
Human Rights Activism in Conservative Rural Areas  

JOHN SCHNEEBERGER

The Bitterroot Valley of Montana is a beautiful area with a reputation as a friendly place. It has an abundance of civic organizations and a feeling of small-town intimacy. However, the valley has been growing rapidly, with an influx of newcomers increasing the population nearly 50% over the past decade. Never known as a socially liberal area, growth trends have reinforced its conservative bent and its predominantly white European demographics.

Human rights' organizing is especially difficult in rural areas like the Bitterroot Valley, where conservative ideology predominates. The broad-based, well-funded conservative movement, massively promoted by print and electronic media, has made it an uphill battle to mobilize traditional progressive constituencies: women, the elderly, youth, and increasingly, low-income people. Ravalli County, which is primarily the Bitterroot Valley, also lacks a diversity of racial and ethnic minorities, key constituencies for human rights work.

Radical Right and Militia Forces

Conservative politicians have dominated politics in the valley. Their policies have lead to rampant, environmentally damaging urban sprawl, a low-wage economy, and serious deficiencies in health and human services. The religious right is pushing a theocratic, homophobic agenda in valley public schools. And radical property rights activists regularly scapegoat environmentalists as responsible for forest fires and a lack of good jobs. In the Bitterroot valley, conservatives want a world of low taxes, low wages (for the help), rare and compliant people of color, and invisible GLBT people. The stridently conservative climate of the valley is the result of an effective campaign of marketing reactionary values and ideology.

Formed in response to white supremacists moving into Montana in the spring of 1994, the Bitterroot Human Rights Alliance (BHRA) found itself confronting the "patriot" and militia movements. When militia cells were attempting to undermine local government and judiciary, and bankrupt the county with fraudulent liens, BHRA held press conferences, published community petitions and held a large public rally. BHRA worked with groups across the social and political spectrum to spark a community-wide backlash against the politics and tactics of regressive populist patriots.

In recent years, BHRA has been trying to address the social climate that makes the Bitterroot Valley fertile ground for the hard-core right-wing. Our efforts focus on the needs of marginalized and maligned groups in the Bitterroot Valley. Our education presentations and forums promote progressive reform by an appeal to democratic values such as pluralism, tolerance, equity, and justice. We have ongoing programs to fight anti-gay intimidation and harassment in area public schools. We regularly engage the press, public officials, and the police about bigoted and slanderous activities by groups and individuals.

Mobilizing for Progressive Change

Most recently, we have begun an initiative to rebuild progressive constituencies, starting with the moderate-to-low-income community. Ravalli County has some of the lowest wages in the nation, combined with a relatively expensive cost of living. BHRA has been canvassing the mixed income neighborhood in Hamilton to engage people about wages and collect support for a community campaign to address the issue.

In the canvassing, we asked people if they believe that there is a problem with low wages and lack of benefits in the valley. Seventy-eight percent of those polled said there was a problem (7% said no; 15% didn't know). People were then asked to choose from a list of four reasons. Two of the reasons given were those put out by the conservative movement: high taxes on business and environmental restrictions on logging and industry. The other two were from the progressive analysis: employers pay less because they can, and the lack of labor unions. Fifty-two percent choose the progressive analysis, while 34% cited reasons promoted by conservatives (8% cited reasons from both sides, the rest didn't know). What's more, many expressing conservative ideology were not strongly fixed to those positions when challenged.

The survey results show a sizeable prospective constituency for progressive change. We recently started meetings with community activists and union organizers (Laborers, Commercial Workers, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, and the Carpenter's Union that is newly active in the valley). BHRA wants to spur union organizing in the valley to increase the bargaining power of valley employees, improving the wage position of both union and non-union workers.

The second part of the strategy is to get a community campaign started to change attitudes that perpetuate the low-wage climate. Another side benefit is that we are getting environmentalists and labor talking, which will help close the rift that was opened by the effective use of wedge issues by the conservative movement.

If human rights are to be put on the policy agenda in areas like the Bitterroot Valley, it is essential that campaigns of persuasion be carried out to bring unaffiliated and uncommitted people into the campaign for social and economic justice.

John Schneeberger is Coordinator of the Bitterroot Human Rights Alliance. BHRA received a grant from RESIST this year.

For more information, contact BHRA, PO Box 915, Hamilton, MT 59840.
New Vision From the Mountains

UPNET Speaks with a Progressive Voice in Intermountain West

LORNA VOGT

In a state and region that is conservative, predominantly white and rapidly changing, Utah Progressive Network (UPNet) works to advance the progressive agenda. We do so by recognizing the unique aspects of Utah and how they fit with national and regional strategies for change. Perhaps one of our most important roles is to share a new vision of the world, inspire hope that we can achieve this vision, and hence decrease the sense of isolation many Utahns feel.

In many ways, organizing in Utah reflects what is happening throughout the West. Land use, a shifting economy, and changing demographics dominate the debate. States in the West are highly urbanized with a clear divide between rural and urban populations. Utah, for example, is the sixth most urbanized state in the nation with more than half of its 2 million people living in small, centrally located metropolitan areas.

In Utah, as in most other western states, the urban areas are far more diverse, progressive, and affluent. In contrast, the rural areas are conservative, white, and lower income. Traditionally progressive constituencies almost always live in and are served by urban-based organizations. Yet political power is held disproportionately by rural lawmakers, creating roadblocks for building progressive power statewide.

People of color make up a very small percentage of the Intermountain West's population. There are relatively few political or social change organizations within communities of color, and white-led organizations struggle to equalize their power relationship with organizations of color. Other identity groups are also isolated. These challenges are in no way unique to the West, but it is important to recognize that the Intermountain region is more homogeneous, more dispersed, and is farther removed both in time and space from historical liberation movements.

However, some of the most successful campaigns against conservative attacks take place in the West. This region brings in new residents attracted to the environment and overall high quality of life. Many of the new westerners are progressive, and because they feel their difference more acutely, are often more eager to engage in political work than they would be if they lived in a more progressive state. We can tap into this latent power base by articulating a clear alternative vision.

Religious and Cultural Challenges

But no doubt about it, there are unique characteristics of Utah that make organizing and coalition work particularly challenging. In Utah, the Latter Day Saints, or Mormon, church plays an undeniably strong role in local politics. Utah’s legislature is 97% LDS; the state’s population is more than 70% Mormon. In and around Salt Lake City, the non-LDS population is in the majority. In that sense Utah shares some of the dynamics of southern states: a blend of conservative, pro-family-movement social policy and anti-government, free-market economic policy.

The church influences politics to some degree in many of our neighboring states in the region. What is unique to Utah is the degree to which LDS church members, our elected leaders, residents, and social justice groups agree on the power and influence of the church. Without a doubt it colors the way we work, our strategies, messages, and willingness to take risks to achieve success.

One of the main ways we see the religious culture play out is in how social justice groups conduct issue campaigns. The culture reinforces advocacy and service more than organizing and grassroots mobilization. Groups tend to focus more narrowly on single issues, and when they advocate, they tend to do so carefully. Public policy campaigns look and feel more mainstream, talking about economic development rather than worker rights, community safety rather than civil liberties, or preserving social funding rather than re-asserting the role of government to provide a safety net.

Our belief is that in order to really change the dominant worldview and hence create the context for progressive social change, we need to offer an unapologetic, values-based, strong and hopeful alternative vision. A key strategy is to do power analysis work—identify all potential allies and leverage work across a broad spectrum of tactics. Other strategies that will work in the Intermountain West include more coalition and multi-issue work. This is truly a state that can only benefit from long-term investment in relationship work, shared campaigns, and the security that comes from having strong allies. The traditional environmental community could see enormous benefits from taking on environmental justice, involving indigenous organizers, and making the connections between toxins and the healthy lifestyle the West prides itself on.

Framing the Progressive Agenda

We need to invest also in building constituency-based organizing primarily in communities of color. And traditionally white groups need to let organizations of color develop their own leadership. This does not preclude coalition work but it requires that white organizations understand and respect power differentials. The West is vulnerable to anti-immigrant, racist initiatives because our demographic and economic base is changing rapidly and some are looking for a scapegoat for economic difficulties. Partnering to defeat these initiatives will go a long way to building the kind of coalitions and alliances we need.

One of our most important areas of work, therefore, is to develop tools for framing and expanding the progressive agenda. And we need to unmask the connection between local corporate-conservative players and national leaders. Their influence is clear but it is so much a part of local culture that we don’t see the national agenda at work. We must demonstrate that in spite of—and because of—its unique characteristics, Utah has an important role to play in the fight for this country’s future.

Lorna Vogt is the director of Utah Progressive Network. UPNet received a multi-year grant from RESIST. For more information, contact UPNet, PO Box 521391, Salt Lake City, UT 84152; www.upnet.org.
Nevada Activists Build Bridges

Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada

BOB FULKERSON

Building a democratic, progressive, multi-racial movement to win governing power in a state dominated by the Mormon Church and other conservative behemoths sounds daunting. But wracking up incremental victories for justice along the way shows PLAN (Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada) is moving in the right direction.

We’ve had impressive wins related to taxes (Nevada became the only state to significantly raise taxes this year), support for low-income people, racial justice and protection of our land and water. And we’ve had our share of bitter losses and heated internal debates. Through it we’ve learned that “no defeat is entirely made up of defeat,” as William Carlos Williams said, and that internal conflicts present opportunities for growth. Indeed, if we’re always winning maybe we’re not shooting high enough. It’s the absence of conflict we need—especially among dozens of organizations with disparate and potentially competing interests.

In bringing together an array of constituencies and organizations without a history of working together, and coalescing around a common agenda to upend Nevada’s basic political governing philosophy, it’s bound to get ugly at one point or another. This only serves to sweeten and highlight the successes and moments of authentic political and personal connections across such huge divides.

One such divide in the Northwest is between labor and environmentalists. Before starting PLAN, I had been repeatedly arrested by union security workers at military installations throughout Nevada, went toe to toe with building trades leaders over the nuclear waste dump, and had a generally bad attitude toward labor to match my sanctimonious environmentalist cloak. Then I read with great interest about Judy Bari’s efforts to court union forest workers in neighboring California. I also realized that conservation allies in our legislature were also union supporters to the credit of the opposition—bought into the divide and conquer strategy.

Several picket lines later, nine key unions, including the Nevada AFL-CIO, are key member groups of PLAN. One of the most powerful moments highlighting labor’s support of Nevada progressives came when the head of our state fed spoke, eloquently and forcefully, (and turning more than a few heads of committee members) about the need for Legislators to vote in favor of the Employment Non Discrimination Act. Nevada became the 13th state in the nation to bar discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Our most vexing challenge relates to building a multi-racial alliance in a coalition dominated by white-led organizations. Other than early welfare and civil rights organizing back in the day, there has not been a history of racial justice work in our state. PLAN leaders recognized early on that to achieve governing power that is accountable and sustainable, racial justice organizing had to be paramount.

But first we, as predominantly white leaders, had to take on our own notions of white privilege and racism at the personal and structural levels. We recognized, sometimes through emotionally charged discussions and workshops, that racism goes deep into the program and structure of the organization. We responded by incorporating structural and political goals around racial justice and diversity issues in our strategic Ten Year Plan. The PLAN by-laws were also changed to create a People of Color Caucus that meets regularly to discuss racial justice issues of PLAN and appoints two of its members to the PLAN executive board, which is also mandated by our by laws to be at least 50% people of color.

The internal dismantling racism process has lead to solid programmatic work. At the behest of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, (one of PLAN’s founding organizations) PLAN groups mobilized to defeat a huge mining operation in one of the finest examples of multi-racial organizing ever seen in Nevada. Most recently, PLAN passed legislation that automatically reenfranchises former inmates and removes most of the barriers to their employment. The PLAN Racial Justice Committee is now embarking on a statewide organizing campaign to raise awareness about the new law and ensure its implementation.

It’s easy for a (gay) white guy of privilege like me—and for my counterparts—to speak for disenfranchised constituencies. But to make deep structural changes, our role needs to be to assist when asked and then get out of the way. PLAN has a long history of building organizations from the grassroots up, helping marginalized constituencies to build power through forming autonomous organizations able to make themselves heard in the public arena. PLAN has helped to create the Nevada Empowered Women’s Project, Latinos for Political Education, A Rainbow Place, northern Nevada’s only gay and lesbian community center; the Nevada Conservation League, and Equal Rights Nevada, formed to address the far right coalition that passed an anti-gay marriage initiative in 2002. The Nevada Young Activist Project is PLAN’s latest effort in this long line of successful constituency development efforts.

Our state will not change significantly until leaders and members from organizations like these are elected to initiate more humane solutions to Nevada’s problems.

Bob Fulkerson is the State Director of Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada. For more information, contact PLAN, 1101 Riverside Drive, Reno, Nevada 89503; www.planevada.org.
The Long View from Rural Oregon

Personal Reflections of a Rural Activist

MIKE EDERA

The Rural Organizing Project formed in 1992 to confront rightwing militia recruitment and organizing. Mike Edera has been a member of ROP for 10 years and offers below a few literary snapshots of his involvement.

On a rainy Saturday in February, 2003, I am wandering around Coos Bay, Oregon, looking for a sandwich. I turn a corner in the beat-up downtown district of this economically stressed coastal community and walk into the Peace Movement. Three hundred people are marching up the street, waving signs and flags, and chanting against the upcoming Iraq invasion. One guy is driving by in an ancient Ford Ranger screaming at them “My brother died for you bastards!”

I have found “the Wave”—small town coastal peace groups that cooperate with each other and turn out to each other’s events. During the build up to war, local peace activists hold a demonstration in a different community on the central Oregon coast. Two hundred miles from Portland, in small towns where tourism and casinos have replaced vanishing mill jobs and logging, where unemployment has hovered at 10% for years, community activists conduct their peace campaign. Economically, the Peace folks are no different from the people hanging out of cars flipping them off. Everyone is getting by on whatever employment can be scraped up.

Most of the Wave leadership keeps in touch via the Rural Organizing Project (ROP), a network of rural and small-town progressive activists. ROP was founded in the early 1990s when the crashing timber economy made rural Oregon vulnerable to right-wing religious political activism.

Rural Oregon was the social base of the Oregon Citizens’ Alliance, which generated a series of local and statewide anti-gay ballot measures that turned every election cycle into a battlefield in the religious right’s culture war. Small-town and rural progressive people responded with the Rural Organizing Project. In communities without any progressive infrastructure, the human dignity group developed as a way for progressive people to find each other. Meeting in church basements and around kitchen tables, ROP learned to re-frame the right-wing’s attack on gay rights, making it an issue of democracy and fairness. The anti-gay ballot was rejected by Oregon voters.

Rural Ruckus

May 16, 2003. Three hundred rural activists fan out through the offices of the Oregon State Legislature in Salem. Some are dressed as chickens and sheep. The ROP’s Rural Ruckus came to the legislature with three demands: Economic Justice at Home; Civil Liberties for All; and Fund Human Needs, Not Global War. Many of the legislators have left for the weekend, but we do have a police escort as we make our way through the crowded offices. The Republican floor is covered with pro-war posters and cartoons. These are the legislators that the Rural Organizing Project folks lobby. The ROP are their constituents, even if the Republicans are hiding out in caucus rooms and closed offices until the inconvenient reminders of the political diversity of their districts go away.

Even more angry than the Republicans are the few rural Democrats. They lecture the Ruckus as if we were school children: “The state budget crisis has nothing to do with the war. Don’t mix the two.” But everyone knows that, despite the state’s three billion dollar budget deficit, shortest school year in the nation, and weeks as the butt of jokes in Doonesbury, the state government has stood by with its hands in its pockets and has allowed Bush to divert billions for the war without a peep of protest. The rural peace movement of the winter is connecting the dots between global war and the economic crisis in their communities.

Resolute Against the PATRIOT ACT

December 8, 2003. Sixty supporters of the West County Coalition for Human Dignity, a ROP member group, wait outside the Forest Grove city hall. We are holding a candlelight vigil, waiting for the city council to begin hearings on a local resolution opposing the USA PATRIOT Act. The council delays us for two hours.

As we wait, I’m speaking to a friend who lives in a small town outside of Portland. Michael is a long-time public interest lawyer who has volunteered much of his life helping PCUN, Oregon’s farm worker union, and CAUSA, Oregon’s immigrant rights organization. He recently returned from the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a caravan of buses that crossed the country to Washington DC and New York City, holding meetings along the way to tell the immigrants’ stories. Dozens of ROP groups and supporters cooperated with CAUSA to raise money for the Oregon bus and send along six ROP supporters. Michael is a tough guy who has seen a lot in his time, but here he is, literally crying as he relays the stories that emerged during the ride. Now he’s waiting around to hear about the resolution. The PATRIOT Act isn’t an academic issue to him. He uses the Bill of Rights to fight for his immigrant clients. There have been thousands of deportations since 9/11.

City Council session begins. When the resolution finally comes up, ten people testify in favor. One man says: “I was a Marine for 40 years. I swore to defend the constitution. The PATRIOT Act is an insult to all who served.” An elderly lady testifies: “My mother was a pioneer and so were my grandparents. They believed in the Bill of Rights. Please support this resolution.”

Council votes down the resolution 4-3. It’s going to be a long fight.

Mike Edera is a landscaper and activist who lives in Scappoose, OR. The Rural Organizing Project is a former RESIST grantee (that outgrew RESIST). For more information, contact ROP, PO Box 1350, Scappoose, OR 97056; www.rop.org.
WOCA Builds Power in Idaho

SONYA REYES-ROSARIO

The Women of Color Alliance (WOCA) formed out of a kitchen table discussion between women of color throughout Idaho. Our journey since that conversation has been slow in pace but strong in depth, like the roots of an oak tree. With passion from the grassroots, we continue to challenge racism and work for justice in Idaho.

In 1999, WOCA held our first women of Color Political Forum at Boise State University. Through that forum, we demonstrated that it is possible for women of color to achieve power and force change collectively and individually. The forum featured several women of color in the Northwest who overcame big obstacles to eventually hold positions in public office. Our membership grew following the success of this forum, and we began planning our entry into Idaho’s social justice movement.

WOCA Unifies for Justice

The Women of Color Alliance seeks to empower women of color and to strengthen relationships among all ethnic groups. We recognize that without dialogue and communications, we would remain a divided people continually confronting the same issues and concerns. WOCA exists to provide a forum for all women of color to come together as allies and create a strong, unified voice that cannot be ignored.

One of our most significant achievements to date was the making of the documentary titled, “The Historical Impact of the “S” Word: From One Generation to the Next.” The documentary raised awareness of the historical damage of racism against Native American women, who had been derogatorily referred to as “squaws.” The documentary and subsequent pressure helped to unseat two prominent conservative politicians in the state.

First, it led to the defeat of State Representative Twila Hornbeck after 20 years in office. During the 2001 fight for farmworker minimum wage, Hornbeck was the representative who had to be gaveled down by the House Speaker for reading a blatantly racist letter on the House floor, asking if people who wanted the minimum wage “were willing to give up their welfare and food stamps.” Referring to the renaming of Idaho landmarks, Hornbeck complained: “Our history books are being rewritten to be politically correct. Our dictionaries are being rewritten to be politically correct, and I find this offensive. I really find it offensive for people to come and tell me what my language means.”

Similarly, the documentary led to the resignation of Jeff Ford, Chairman of the Idaho Geographic Names Advisory Council, after 18 years. Ford was a staunch opponent of eliminating racist names of the geography of Idaho and the sole voice of dissent during the successful battle by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) to change the name of a 5,000-ft. mountain five miles from Pocatello, from “Chinks Peak” to Chinese Peak.”

WOCA also supported a campaign for Proposition One: The Idaho Indian Gaming and Self-Reliance Act. This initiative proposed by statewide ballot made clear that Indian Tribes in Idaho would keep the types of games they currently had on their own tribal lands, set reasonable limits on Indian gaming, and dedicated a percentage of the net revenues to support local schools and educational programs. The measure’s success meant that people would have jobs at livable wages. WOCA gladly educated our members about this initiative and sponsored the Coeur d’Alene Tribe in September 2002 at the Hispanic Issues Training Conference at Boise State University, with over 400 Latinos attending. Many in the Latino community learned about the initiative for the first time and readily endorsed it.

WOCA has celebrated other recent achievements and has plans to move ahead. WOCA recently attended a special session at the United Nations on “Civil Society and Human Rights.” Beginning next the New Year, WOCA will begin a program on Idaho Public Access Television, profiling women of color. This show will offer women a venue to share their achievements and the achievements of women they know in their communities, doing social, political and community organizing. Just like WOCA, the show will give a face and a voice to the many good and strong women in Idaho!

Sonya Reyes-Rosario is the Executive Director of the Women of Color Alliance.

WOCA received a grant from RESIST this year. For more information, contact WOCA, PO Box 603, Meridian, ID 83680; www.wocaonline.org.