

Experienced Leader Helps Revive Gay Rights Movement

by Jeremy M. Barker

In the tiny basement offices of Equal Rights Washington (ERW), Michael McAfoose bustles around, a singular ball of energy set to organizing the struggle for gay marriage in the state of Washington. ERW, which coalesced from a couple of smaller, earlier gay rights organizations this spring, serves as an umbrella group, helping to organize the efforts of dozens of groups state-wide.

Several months ago, *the Stranger* ran a laudatory article about McAfoose called "A Star is Born," in response to McAfoose's success in producing a counter-protest to the James Dobson's anti-gay gathering at Safeco Field at the drop of a hat. But while McAfoose is deserving of credit, he's hardly just been "born."

"I've been doing this for..." McAfoose leans back in his chair and does some quick calculations. "Twelve years?"

But there's no question that the gay marriage debate has brought renewed interest to the gay rights movement. "People have gotten complacent," he says of people in Seattle. Seattle, which has one of, if not the oldest, gay rights laws in the country, is relatively safe territory for gays and lesbians. Since the early 1990s, McAfoose claims, the gay rights movement has been too disorganized to do much besides respond. "We need to organize," he says emphatically, his calm voice moving up a notch. "This isn't about special rights. That's what's always said is that this is about 'special rights.' It's not. This is about rights."

Many commentators have maintained that San Francisco's brief foray into sanctioning gay marriage would serve as a watershed. The sheer banality of the photos of wedded gay couples, which were

almost indistinguishable from those of any other marriage, was supposed to forever change the political landscape by crushing the stereotype of flamboyant gay pride parades, forever ridiculed on the likes of *Fox News*. But for McAfoose, it's not particularly important.

"It all really began in Vermont, with civil unions. Civil unions aren't equal, and we need to educate people about that, but that's where it began. Then it went to Massachusetts, and that's where people were first given their rights under the law. In San Francisco, it was basically the mayor saying, 'I'm going to do this.' And I don't think he had the right to," McAfoose says. "And now the California Supreme Court has voided those marriages, and that's sad for those couples. That's why we're doing this right."

Although ERW is an umbrella organization of which the ACLU of Washington is a member, ERW has little to do with the actual court battle for gay marriage. Instead, its primary mission is to educate people about the issues. That's where McAfoose comes in. As the volunteer coordinator, he's responsible not only for helping to organize committees to take on various issues and putting diverse groups in contact with one another, but also directing walk in volunteers who, during our interview, frequently popped into his office.

In person, McAfoose is somewhat quiet, a decidedly reasonable speaker with a vast knowledge of the Washington political landscape. It is only when the conversation turned to election politics that he becomes

heated at all, and even then, it's more a steely determination than anger.

John Kerry's state opposition to gay marriage, in an attempt to avoid inflaming a wedge issue, has signaled to many that a change in the presidency will do little for the gay rights movement. But for McAfoose, it's a sign of something worse.

"John Kerry has a perfect record of voting on gay rights issues," he says. "Perfect. But during campaigns, this always happens. People think they can get away with playing politics with us, and we have to change that."

One of the causes ERW is taking up in the coming election is support of beleaguered Democratic Attorney General candidate Deborah Senn. They're also preparing for potential backlash by conservatives following court rulings in favor of gay marriage. The answer, for McAfoose, is always education. "We're going to do this right," he says of the struggle for gay marriage, which looks to heat up this fall when the legislature returns to session, and the various gay marriage court cases are brought together to go before the Washington State Supreme Court. Not only does ERW rely on the courts to enforce their rights, but they intend to get out there with the message to educate the public.

At one point during the interview, McAfoose stands up and walks over to a large filing cabinet in his office. "Seattle has a long history of gay rights," he gestures, opening a drawer. Inside are fliers, publications, announcements and so on, dating back 30 years. "This is history," he says as he leafs through the documents. Gays and lesbians have long found a home in Seattle; if ERW is successful, they will well into the future. ♦



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