Basic Rights Oregon

Established in 1996, Basic Rights Oregon (BRO) was the first statewide political organization in Oregon to work on the behalf of LGBTQ rights (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). Its mission is to ensure that LGBTQ Oregonians “experience equality by building a broad and inclusive politically powerful movement, shifting public opinion, and achieving policy victories." Part of a national movement seeking justice and marriage equality, Basic Rights Oregon is the largest nonprofit gay rights organization in the state.

Based in Portland, BRO was formed in response to a growing number of conservative political activists and their attacks on the civil rights of Oregon's LGBTQ residents. In 1988, for example, the Oregon Citizen's Alliance (OCA), a conservative political action group, had campaigned for and successfully passed Ballot Measure 8, repealing Governor Neil Goldschmidt's 1987 Executive Order 8720, which prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in state employment.

Since 1988, five statewide anti-LGBTQ measures and more than twenty-five local initiatives have been on the ballot in Oregon. The OCA's 1992 Ballot Measure 9—a failed attempt to group homosexuality with pedophilia, sadism, and masochism in the Oregon Constitution—resulted in a sharp increase in crimes against gay men and lesbians.

Basic Rights Oregon has faced challenges at both the ballot box and in broader public opinion from such organizations as the Oregon Citizen's Alliance and the Defense of Marriage Coalition. BRO collaborated with national organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union on the issue of marriage equality. Together, in 2004, they responded to attempts to prevent the recognition of same-sex marriages in Multnomah County, in the Oregon Supreme Court (*Li et al.* v *Oregon*). That same year, Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 36, sponsored by the Defense of Marriage Coalition, which amended the Oregon Constitution to limit Oregon's recognition of marriage to those "between one man and one woman." In 2005, the Oregon Supreme Court case was dismissed. As of 2011, all efforts to overturn Measure 36 have failed.

In 2007, Basic Rights Oregon lobbied successfully for the passage of two laws to establish domestic partnerships for same-gendered couples and to ban discrimination against LGBTQ people. On May 9, 2007, Governor Kulongoski signed the Oregon Family Fairness Act (HB 2007), which provided essential rights to gay and lesbian couples, and the Oregon Equality Act (SB 2), which protects LGBTQ people from discrimination in housing, employment, foster parenting, public schools, and public accommodations. The Oregon Equality Act makes Oregon one of only fifteen states that respect individual expression of gender identity.

In 1999, BRO initiated the Basic Rights Education Fund (BREF), a nonprofit focused on education and advocacy. Since 2004, most of the organization's resources have gone to organization, education, and advertising campaigns. In 2011, BREF launched its second statewide television campaign, featuring couples, gay and straight, talking about love and marriage.

Jean Harris, the founding executive director of BRO, died on June 25, 2011. As of 2011 Basic Rights Oregon maintains a staff of twenty and continues to rely on volunteers and community partners.

Written by Heather Burmeister

Further Reading:

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Tedesco, Elizabeth A. "'Humanity on the Ballot': The Citizen Initiative and Oregon's War over Gay Civil Rights." *Boston College Third World Law Journal* Vol. 22:1 (January 2002): 168-171.

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