

How to:

Do Public Speaking About Prop 6

BY AMBER HOLLIBAUGH
AND MICHAEL WARD

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This is an information sheet of suggestions and ideas for speaking publicly against Proposition 6. For all of us, speaking against the Briggs Initiative means at least coming out publicly in support of gay rights. But for many it means actually coming out publicly as a gay person. To do this on a podium in front of an audience can be a terrifying prospect.

Yet it is now that we must begin breaking the hold of ignorance used against our livelihoods, our existence. One important way to do this is by reaching into our communities, labor union and social clubs to challenge this dangerous legislation.

One hour of discussion cannot dispel every misconception an audience may have about lesbianism and homosexuality. But polls have shown that most people who vote anti-gay on ballot measures say they have never known a gay person. Community meetings are safe places for people to meet their first openly gay speaker, and they are safe places for people to begin questioning the propaganda of the "New Right", Briggs and the forces he represents.

The fight against Proposition 6 must enlist as many people as possible--both straight and gay. Many speakers may choose to emphasize the anti-labor or anti-civil rights aspect of Proposition 6 rather than the homosexual issue. After all, you do not need to be FOR homosexuality to be AGAINST Proposition 6. But this pamphlet addresses the problems which will be faced by all speakers who will be challenging homophobic prejudices and emphasizes the problems unique to lesbians and gay male speakers.

This information is the composite experiences we have had as openly gay and lesbian speakers. We are not professionals with speech writers and practiced deliveries. That is why we KNOW THAT ANYBODY CAN DO PUBLIC SPEAKING. Chances are an audience will respond more warmly to someone from their own communities who is open and informative than they will to a slick public relations spiel.

PULLING YOURSELVES TOGETHER

To do public speaking you needn't be connected to a large speakers bureau. A handful of people is all you will probably want to get started. You need to involve only enough folks so that you can 1) send more than one speaker to each public meeting, 2) have some latitude choosing who in your group would be best with what audience and 3) be able to avoid sending someone who is partially in the closet, as at their workplace, to speak where it might jeopardize their cover.

GETTING GIGS

Because Proposition 6 is so controversial, people will probably not seek out speakers first, at least not until the tail-end of the campaign. Therefore, it's up to you to start making it happen. Put together a phone and mailing list of groups like PTA's, civic groups, women's groups, church groups, ethnic groups, union meetings, teachers' associations and student groups in your region. Send a letter to let them know you exist and have services they may desire.

Then follow this up by phone to set confirmed dates for speaking. Use any personal contacts to arrange informal raps in junior colleges, adult education programs and neighborhood gatherings.

INFO FIRST

Public speaking is not easy work. You must educate yourself before you go into a speaking situation. Being well-prepared with facts and figures is one of the best ways to overcome your initial anxieties about public speaking. For example, knowing that 90% of child molestation cases involve straight men against female children and pointing out that no one suggests firing heterosexual men as a group can be a big help in exposing the hollowness of these myths about gay people.

One source of background information are the other pamphlets in this series. Being armed with concrete arguments is important even for non-gay speakers. Speakers who choose to emphasize the anti-labor or anti-civil rights aspects of Proposition 6 will undoubtedly also be asked questions about homosexuality.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

For many of us, coming to terms with our gayness has taken years of self-exploration, reading and talking with other gay people. But none of this can prepare us adequately for facing a straight audience and trying to make them understand. We STRONGLY suggest you set up a trial run with your fellow speakers and friends to test yourselves out in a situation where it's safe to goof up. Role play it. Imagine a concrete situation such as a union meeting and choose a person to be on the spot. Everyone else should be the audience and ask her/him questions. Ask the hardest questions you can think of, everything that could possibly come up. After a serious period of role-playing, stop and give each other feedback, evaluating both the content of the responses and the delivery. Be frank and helpful, remembering that going through this makes it much easier to face your first "real" speaking engagement.

Hearing antagonistic questions in this situation makes the shock of hearing them later on a lot easier to take. Role-playing also helps you pinpoint your weak areas so you can strengthen them. All in all, this is much more than a game, although it is also fun, educational and infuriating.

TAKE A FRIEND

If at all possible, it is a good idea to speak as a team of two or three rather than as an individual. Going as a man and a woman team in itself reminds people that half of homosexuals are women. Similarly including non-white speakers helps explode the myth that all homosexuals are white. A number of people can provide a number of perspectives: it is always difficult for a man to speak for women and vice versa. A non-gay speaker and a gay speaker also make a good team.

Speaking alone makes the task more than twice as difficult. Going as a team means you have a friend there for support, to share half the work and to help you out of difficult questions. Just be sure you and your partner work out beforehand the ways you're going to do the presentation. It's embarrassing to find yourselves competing with each other or even disagreeing. This is especially important if men and women are going out as a team. Men frequently dominate in this kind of situation, so confront the issue before

you face an audience, not during the time it's most important to be united.

ASSESSING YOUR AUDIENCE

Before you ever get there, think about the group you'll be talking to. Who are they? What class, race, sex, age? Why are they a group? What holds them together? (For instance, a PTA is a group of concerned parents who want to have some influence over their kids' programs and who want to work with teachers.)

Try to predict what your group's major concerns are likely to be. What will their response be to a proud gay person in their midst? Consider seriously if you're the right person for this group. Most important, think about what you have in common (job, ethnic background, gender, parenthood, local issues, etc.) with the group so you can cut down the distance your audience assumes with anyone openly gay.

THE FORM

We think a short presentation with a long question-and-answer period is best. If you can, introduce yourself with lots of personal details like your age, where you're from, your job, your kids. This emphasizes similarities from the start. Then deliver a short presentation putting out clearly a few major points which knock holes in the most common misconceptions. End with personal examples of the effects Proposition 6 could have on you and your audience.

If after inviting questions from the audience you are met with dead silence, don't panic. Calmly smile and say, "well, one question often asked is..." and answer it. The ball will get rolling.

Although this may seem like a scary format, we think it's good because you want to have as much give-and-take contact with your audience as you can. If you don't basically respect your audience, DON'T GO. PERIOD.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

When answering questions, be simple, direct and as honest as you safely can. Remember that people are kept ignorant of gay people and truly don't have much information from us about us. Therefore be yourself, frank and personal.

When someone asks a tactless question like "Do you really love other women/men?" realize that this person probably has always wanted to ask it. Questions asked out of sincere curiosity deserve straightforward answers. And if your response truly connects with what she was asking, she will begin to see you more as a human being and less as a frightening, unknown threat. Often it is helpful to rephrase a sticky question, but don't be evasive. Don't be afraid to reiterate arguments you have made before. Your major points should be worth restating. Be concrete. Usually a specific example drawn from real experience will answer a question better than a theoretical explanation. And don't ramble. Remember that if a question is really awful or genuinely hostile you can refuse to answer it. "That question is really offensive to me"--explain why--"and that is not the reason I'm here; I'm here to explain the Briggs Initiative." Then lead the discussion where you want it to go.