

How to:

Do Public Speaking About Prop 6

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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.

HOSTILITY AND SUSPICION

This you should expect. Homosexuality is a heavy subject, one that everyone is scared of and angry about. Because so many real fears have been falsely tied to gayness the questions can get difficult. Don't refuse to see hostility. It won't just go away. There are several good ways to deal with it.

Don't let hostility scare you or rush you into an argument you don't want to make. It's very important to establish your rights to be there YOUR way. YOU are the guest speaker. Demand to be treated as such.

Hostility can very easily backfire, making the audience more sympathetic to you. An abusive question or argument is often so off the wall it invalidates a whole line of reasoning, even the parts others might think they agree with.

Hostility may have a basis you don't know about, so check out what hidden resentments the person may be basing their arguments on. (Perhaps the gay person he is bad-mouthing is his landlord. This does not make his attitude right, but knowing it gives you some idea what the REAL issue is.) Many times when people are suspicious it's coming from real fears and frustrations--a real fear of child molesters, say, or frustration at having no say in their kids' education. But they focus it wrongly on us instead of on those unseen forces who love to keep their hands clean.

So LISTEN to the questions and try to figure out where they're coming from. Look for the question inside a question. Frequently people don't know how to ask what they actually want to know. This makes them uncomfortable and frightened.

The last thing to mention is an important point. Figure out if the question is serious or not. No matter how hostile, if the person genuinely wants to know something, try to answer. But if you are being used as a punching bag or a joke, confront the person. Ask, "Are you really serious, or is this just your idea of a good time?" Put that person on the spot and challenge him to take your life as seriously as he takes his own.

TALKING SEX AIN'T TALKING DIRTY

No one in our culture is taught to be comfortable talking about anything sexual. "Sexual matters" are generally kept darkly hidden on the flimsiest excuses. (The children might hear.) This is true of heterosexuality, so you know it's going to be tough if the subject is gayness. Forty-year-old adults still giggle when they hear words like "weenie." Your audience is dealing with the same sexual shame which makes it so hard for us as gay people to confront and appreciate our own sexual desires. It's not just homosexuality or lesbianism but SEXUALITY that is TABOO.

So remember that a large measure of the coolness or hostility of your audience comes from their embarrassment at having to deal publicly with subjects they know little about and probably consider shameful. This is when trying to figure out your audience beforehand pays off. If, for example, you're talking to an audience of all women, you could talk generally about the fear all women have of sexual coercion and rape. Dealing with a topic common to you and everyone in your audience makes them feel closer to you as ano-

ther woman. Draw links where you can. So often people have NO IDEA of who we are and what we suffer. They don't see us as people whose problems are basically the same as theirs, only compounded heavily by our gayness.

BE COOL

If you spot a familiar face or if you suspect that someone in your audience is gay, don't assume they are out in any way. You must make every effort to protect their cover. This means even avoiding any extra eye contact with this person, no matter how badly you may be feeling the need of moral support from an ally.

STRAIGHT SPEAKERS

Straight brothers and sisters will encounter their own special problems. They may be asked "What do those gay people want?" or challenged to defend outrageous aspects of gay life or inflamed images of homosexuality. No one can speak to what "all" gays want since homosexuals cover the whole social, racial, age and class range in about the same proportions as the general population. Neither should you feel obliged to defend homosexuality as "all good" any more than heterosexuality could be seen as positive in every context. (No one thinks rape is good, we hope.)

Usually abrasive questions like this are rhetorical. Try to find out what the person really wants to know. You should be as informed as possible on the facts of homosexuality, but if you get stumped don't be afraid to say, "I don't have that answer. What I do know about it is..." and perhaps refer them to an appropriate source.

If you can help promote a realistic understanding of gayness, well and good. But you are not there to get your audience to "like" homosexuals. The important message to get across is an understanding of the dangers of anti-gayness and how it threatens everyone. You could point out how the vicious homophobia of Proposition 6 would translate into the witch-hunts of school board hearings thus threatening public education and all schoolworkers. Such a danger could easily be transferred to singles, divorcees, women who have had abortions, Catholics, American Indians or any unpopular minority.

Another problem is "queer-baiting." If that happens, you can turn it around and point out how anyone can be suspect of homosexuality. That, after all, is what a witch-hunt is all about, and it would dramatize concretely the effects of Proposition 6.

YOU WILL MOVE PEOPLE AND NEVER EVEN KNOW IT

We think you will find that all of the preparation and anxiety you put into a presentation will be well worth it. To enter a room of strangers who've never confronted this issue before and watch them begin to question their previous opinions or grasp a new viewpoint is exciting, gratifying and moving. Even if it's only one or two people, that's great.

But don't get yourself up to expect quick change. Sometimes your audience may be cold and unresponsive.

You may feel afterwards the evening was a bust and blame yourself. But our task is hard. We are trying to erase homophobia that is ancient and deeply rooted. Remember though, that your mere presence is revolutionary. Many who show no response at all will be inwardly impressed by the presence of a rational, proud and feeling human being who talks about loving someone of the same gender in ways they've never heard before. The image of you will stick, planting a seed you may never see flourish. Two years from now a person confronted by a gay child, perhaps their own, may remember and deal differently than they would have otherwise. Every individual or partial victory builds on another. Building enough of them is our job, and that doesn't depend on the outcome of the vote in November.

FEEDBACK, FOLLOW-UP AND RECRUITMENT

Do not forget at the end of your talk to encourage sympathizers, especially the non-gay types, to get active in the anti-Proposition 6 effort. Let them know specifics of what they can do and how to join us.

Be sure to provide enough buttons and literature for everyone there as well as extras for people to take home to distribute. In big groups, if it is permitted, the best way is to set up a literature table which also includes a sign-up sheet for your mailing list, a sign-up sheet for those who want to volunteer time and energy and a can for donations.

If possible, arrange for co-workers to be there. They can provide objective feedback on the presentation and can staff the literature table afterwards, enabling the speakers to mingle with the crowd. It is crucial for speakers to be available for conversation afterwards. That is when people come up and offer the personal expressions of support or quickly come out to you. That is the time when you make contacts, get offers of help and encourage sympathizers to get active.

Also, ask people what they thought of the talk. Feedback is vital for improving your speaking skills. Be serious about passing what you learn on to others doing speaking. (That includes us. We plan to follow-up on this pamphlet to learn from your experiences and suggestions.)

THE CHALLENGE

We know how tough it can be to get up before a group of people. Exposing our most personal values to public question is truly difficult. As products of this culture we know all too well how deeply held anti-gayness can be. But just as we have changed and grown by confronting and resolving self-hate and facing the harshness of our oppression, so too can other people change and grow.

People can and do change. They can grow to see their similarities with us as well as learn to respect our differences. Veterans of the Eugene campaign recently told an audience of Californians, "We are up against an incumbent who has been in for thousands of years. There is nothing new about bigotry and ignorance. What has changed is our ability to stand up and fight back."

Good luck, and keep in touch so that your experiences can help others.

Feed[←]back

Please help us improve the information in this leaflet. We very much want to hear about your experiences speaking, especially concrete details like

■ Types of groups you address.

■ Audience: its composition, questions and reaction to you.

■ Your talk: the approach you took, its effectiveness, its problems.

■ Results: resolutions, contributions, volunteer involvement you obtain.

Let us know how well the advice of this leaflet works for you and what lessons you learn from public speaking.

We will compile all the feedback we receive and make it available to you. With your cooperation we can learn from the anti-Prop 6 campaign and improve our effectiveness in the struggle for our rights.

SO AFTER YOUR ENGAGEMENTS
WRITE UP YOUR EXPERIENCES ON A
PIECE OF PAPER AND MAIL IT TO

THE CALIFORNIA OUTREACH GROUP
537 JONES ST., SUITE 8186
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94102