

Being Developed

By: Mike Edera

I spent ten years yelling at my truck radio. In 1985, when I got a decent pick up to operate my gardening business, with a functional radio, I discovered talk shows. I was already a listener and supporter of KBOO(www.kboo.org), Portland's community owned radio station, which I love to this day. But now I began to discover other imaginary friends to help break the isolation of self-employment.

This was the heyday of Rush Limbaugh, and I loved to hate him. Rush could sometimes be funny, but usually was pretty boring. It was alarming how many fellow contractors would be tuned in to him on their little portable radios, as they painted or carpentered along. But he didn't hold my attention, so I would greet his show with a few choice explicatives and move on.

The station I latched onto, almost immediately, was KPDQ, Portland's Christian radio station. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the changes I saw happening in my own environment. I lived in the hills on a small piece of land just beyond Portland's outer western fringe. I was a 'back-to-the-lander' and for a couple of years, a homeschooler when my son was of kindergarten and first grade age. I realized that more and more people I knew with similar lifestyles seemed to be involved in some kind of church. Also, the printing company I used, the gas station-mechanic who took care of my truck, the nursery where I bought plants, the day care where my son went occasionally seemed to have some Christian connection and a political orientation I did not share.

I was a regular consumer of left wing publications, books, and media. I knew about the Moral Majority, and hated all things Reagan. I guess KPDQ offered me a window into the thinking of the other side.

There were various ranting preachers. There was Dr James Dobson's Focus on the Family, "Where we turn our hearts towards home." The combination of child rearing advice and toxic anti-abortion and gay bashing rants fascinated me. But the show I listened to the most was the call-in talk show hosted at the time by Lew Davies and Georgeanne Rice.

This was before call screening was instituted, so it was easy to call in and debate. Davies and Rice were actually pretty fair, as right wing ideologues went. So I called in and debated a lot, pulling over to pay phones and spending time on hold as I listened to Christian advertising plugs. I was the only dissenting voice I ever heard on those shows, so maybe I helped ratings a tiny bit. Who knows? I spent years where this was my prime political activity.

Sometime in the early 1990's I was alarmed to realize that the characters from my radio station world had made the leap into real life and were the main actors on Oregon's

political stage. A Christian fundamentalist political outfit called the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA) was sponsoring a statewide ballot measure – Measure 9 - to put anti – ‘Homosexual’ language into the Oregon Constitution. There were ‘Battle lines being drawn’ as the song goes.

I helped with the No on 9 campaign, then the No on 13 campaign to shoot down the second try at anti-gay constitutional shenanigans. Between those campaigns, the OCA sponsored a series of local anti-gay ordinances in small towns around the state. I joined the effort to defeat a measure in Cornelius, a town near by. I walked the streets of this half farm town half lower middle class suburb in the company of a group led by three rebellious Catholic Sisters. I debated the issues on doorsteps with articulate people whose political views were diametrically opposite from mine. Sometimes our group sat around trying to figure out where this fundamentalist movement came from. It was old news to me, thanks to KPDQ.

Around this time I met Ms Marcy Westerling, or at least was at a meeting where she spoke. What made an impression on me, besides her shock of blond hair, was when she stated in a matter of fact way that “We all have other lives, so we should do our political stuff in the most efficient way we can”. The left political culture that I had been exposed to never admitted that we had other lives. Either we were nameless done-volunteers in the Democratic Party machine, or we were supposed to be fanatical dog soldiers in left wing grouplet politics.

A bit later, I got a call from Ms Westerling inviting me to something called the 4th Annual Rural Caucus of the Rural Organizing Committee. I had loved the political involvement of our campaign in Cornelius, and since that group was ‘at a low ebb’ right then I accepted the invitation. Maybe I could get help reviving the local Human Dignity Group.

When I arrived at the caucus in Albany Oregon, held – of course!- in a church basement – there was Marcy Westerling at the registration table. I remember we were both a bit taken aback by each other. Then she hurried off to take care of business.

What I remember from that first caucus is that rather than the political convention of an established progressive organization; it was more like a big laboratory. Here were 150 or so folks who had all experienced some variation of a similar encounter with an alien, threatening ideology in their own day to day environments. People were trying to figure this thing out, in a calm, empirical way, and no one was saying they had all the answers. I did get some help on how to revive a moribund group, and build a database, in a workshop led by fellow volunteers with more experience. At some point in the day, Marcy handed me a modem from a big pile of similar gadgets in a cardboard box, and a guy named Larry Taylor offered to help me get set up on e-mail. It would be several years before I made that leap.

A lot of time at the caucus was spent handing out awards to groups and individuals, just like in the third grade. There was a nice lunch, and a moving closing ceremony with

people linking arms, and basically a lot of good vibes, intelligence, and love shared around.

Over the next few months, I continued to get guidance, over the phone and sometimes in person from Marcy, from staffer Kelly Weigel, and from board members like Janice Thompson. I had made the change from being an isolated guy calling into talk shows from a pay phone to an organizer with actual colleagues. Sometimes they cheered me on, sometimes they nagged me, and sometimes they asked me to reflect a moment on what the hell I was doing.

I began to share some of my writing via the on-line ROPNet list. I was interested in the connection between social conservatives leading the anti-queer political Inquisition, and the economic right wing that was using similar phony populist tactics to take a meat cleaver to Oregon's progressive tax base and to schools and social services. The ROP staff used some of these ideas to develop their agenda for the state legislature. I was finding a political role where I could be of actual use, and even develop some leadership skills. It felt like coming home.

A few years later, I was lucky enough to have Marcy enter my life in a personal way, but that's a whole other story.