

EQCA raising money for ad buy

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By Heather Cassell

Let California Ring, a new educational campaign by gay rights advocates, has a goal of sparking 1 million conversations about the freedom to marry through a network of house parties, an educational video, and a pending TV ad.

Those behind the Let California Ring campaign, which is spearheaded by the Equality California Institute and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, believe they have found a winning formula to change Californians' "hearts and minds" about same-sex marriage, according to Geoffrey Kors, executive director of EQCA, and Seth Kilbourn, policy director of the EQCA Institute.

But it remains to be seen whether the group will raise the millions of dollars needed to purchase airtime in California media markets, several of which are among the most expensive in the country.

The house parties and canvassing at community events are only the starting point, especially for raising the money to march the TV ad into primetime.

According to Kilbourn, the campaign has raised \$2.5 million toward its \$7 million goal. Last month, \$110,000 raised at EQCA's Los Angeles gala was earmarked for Let California Ring (the dinner itself raised some \$400,000 for EQCA, according to Kors). But more money is needed before state residents – and potential voters – will see the ad.

To bolster fundraising efforts for Let California Ring, the EQCA Institute hired Mike Marshall as a consultant for the overall campaign, Kilbourn said.

"There are very few people that I could think of who have more commitment to securing the freedom to marry than Mike Marshall," said Kors, noting that Marshall will focus solely on raising money for the campaign. "He has been involved in this issue for a decade [and] is very passionate [and he] really knows the donors in the community."

Marshall, who most recently served as executive director at Under One Roof, previously managed the No on Knight campaign against Proposition 22 in 2000. That ballot measure, which defines marriage between a man and a woman in the family code, was passed by 60 percent of the state's voters.

According to Kors, Marshall raised \$6 million in a short time period in the unsuccessful effort to defeat Proposition 22.

"We are really fortunate that he was willing to make this his priority," said Kors of Marshall's latest efforts.

Kilbourn wouldn't discuss Marshall's contract, including how much he will be paid.

Marshall did not return a message seeking comment.

In addition to hiring Marshall, EQCA has posted two job openings for the Let California Ring campaign on its Web site.

According to the most recent Form 990 filings, for 2005, the EQCA Institute had an annual budget of about \$1.1 million, while 990s for EQCA itself showed the agency with an annual budget of about \$956,000. EQCA is a 501(c) 4 nonprofit, while the EQCA Institute is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit.

Kors said that as of 2006, his annual salary is \$127,500, and that he and his partner donated \$25,000 back to EQCA and its affiliated organizations.

In a series of interviews for this article, EQCA officials were reluctant to discuss the television ad, which has been shown to some people. The *Bay Area Reporter* was asked not to write about the ad, but stories about the Let California Ring campaign and the ad have appeared in other LGBT media outlets in recent weeks. EQCA officials have repeatedly stated that they do not want gay marriage opponents to learn about their plans, even as the Let California Ring Web site contains information about the campaign and features a nine-minute video of same-sex couples and allies talking about marriage equality. The Web site also includes information about the television ad, though the ad itself is not shown online.

The goal of Let California Ring, according to Kors, is to open up the conversation about same-sex marriage beyond discussing the legal aspects of being denied benefits. Instead, the campaign is discussing the more intimate reasons of why people get married and how being denied access to marriage hurts LGBT individuals and families.

"Those are hard conversations for people to have," said Kors, "because we are talking about our feelings and who we are as people."

In spite of the difficulty of bringing the conversation away from the political and bringing it to the personal, LGBT individuals and allies have picked it up and are bringing it to their friends, family members, neighbors, and others with whom they come into contact.

Bridal showers

The campaign is swiftly igniting a grassroots fire throughout the state that has been smoldering for two years in research and strategy plans. This summer, EQCAI, NGLTF, and the Let California Ring executive committee, working in partnership with 45 civil rights organizations, lifted the veil on the multilayered campaign that includes a strategic approach to talking about same-sex marriage with Californians at house parties and community events that double as fundraising opportunities.

This activity is leading up to a catchy media campaign that includes an interactive Web site that will be launched at the end of September and a TV ad that is waiting in the wings.

"There is a lot of pride in California," said Trina Olson, the field director for Let California Ring who canvassed at nine Pride festivals around the state. She signed up 17,000 new marriage equality supporters, several hundred volunteers, and identified over 300 hosts for house parties this summer.

House parties have been a hit, according to Olson, who has already assisted with 20 events. She plans on having 10 house parties a week through the end of this year. At the end of the month a calendar of parties will be available at www.letcaliforniarings.org. Olson was unsure of how much money was raised at an average house party.

Hosts get a house party kit that includes a nine-minute DVD that presents the stories of 22 Californians talking about the importance of the freedom to marry, fact sheets about marriage equality, and conversation starters and themes. Staff and trained volunteers from Let California Ring and partner organizations support the hosts by assisting with organizing the party as well as providing a trained speaker at each event.

According to Kors, the goal is to have 1,000 house parties.

"We know that the more conversations we have and the more people stop and think about the issue the more likely they are to be open to changing their minds," said Kors. Especially, said

Kors, when people realize that a specific group of people is "being told that they are going to be excluded from this institution that everyone is taught from when they are young that they should aspire to."

Getting to the heart

All of this planning and work is leading up to the big day – that is if the ad that's waiting in the wings isn't jilted.

The ad, which is targeted at women, starts off with a woman preparing for her wedding day. But as she gets closer to the altar a series of mishaps prevents her from ever joining her groom. A message then fades in on a black screen: "What if you couldn't marry the person you love? Everyday lesbian and gay couples are prevented from marrying. ... Support the freedom to marry. ... Let California Ring."

"Our society has traditionally made weddings and being a bride a much bigger piece of culture for women than being a groom," said Kors about the ad. "So in a way women are likely to respond more to the hurt of being prevented from marrying than men, as a theory, but I think men are very open to hearing that someone is being hurt, especially if it's their child."

Kors added, "I do think that Californians in particular are fair-minded and want to treat people fairly. I do think that when they realize that this actually hurts people they will be open to really thinking about this differently."