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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of *Out in the Mountains* is to serve as a voice for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, and our supporters in Vermont. We wish the newspaper to be a source of information, insight, and affirmation. We also see OITM as a vehicle for the celebration of the culture and diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities here in Vermont and elsewhere.

EDITORIAL POLICY

We will consider for publication any material which broadens our understanding of our lifestyles and of each other. Views and opinions appearing in the paper do not necessarily represent those of *Out in the Mountains*. This paper cannot and will not endorse any candidates or actions of public officials on issues of importance to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. We reserve the right not to publish any material deemed to be overtly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, ageist, classist, xenophobic, or homophobic. Writers' guidelines are available on request. All materials submitted must include a name and a contact number. However, within the pages of the newspaper, articles may appear anonymously upon request, and strict confidentiality will be observed.

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guest editorial

Five Characteristics of Successful GLBT Candidates

The statistic is both depressing and intimidating. Of America's 505,141 elected officials, less than 230 of them are openly gay, lesbian or bisexual. The number is somewhat better than that of ten years ago, however. In 1992, only 84 public officials were prepared to acknowledge they were lesbian, gay or bisexual.

The 150 percent increase is a remarkable achievement, but the simple fact remains: the GLBT population remains grossly under-represented when it comes to public office. What can we expect this year – and what are the common characteristics of successful GLBT candidates?

Our national organizations and political pundits appear to agree that during the 2002 election cycle more than 100 openly gay, lesbian and bisexual candidates and incumbents will run for office. They will run for almost every office conceivable: school boards and county commissions, judicial benches and the Congress.

Many of them will be successful; others will not. Regardless, each of their candidacies will help fulfill the words of Robert F. Kennedy who said, "Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

The question lingers, however. Is there anything an openly lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender candidate can do that will mean the difference between success and failure at the ballot box?

In conducting interviews with nearly 100 GLBT candidates and elected officials from around America, it appears there are five characteristics successful GLB public officials universally share. While a well-financed operation, strong media buys, and enthusiastic volunteers are all essential to the success of a campaign, it appears all – or most – of these five characteristics can make the critical difference.

Coincidentally, each of these characteristics begins with the letter "C":

Community. Successful gay, lesbian and bisexual candidates have a history of extensive involvement in their community before running for elected office. However, their community work is not restricted to the GLBT community.

Rather, winning candidates have built up solid reputations and significant visibility by becoming engaged in city commissions, home and neighborhood associations, library boards, safety patrols and civic groups.

These candidates are

highly visible in their consistent support for community-related activity. Many have their first taste of elected office by running for chairman, director or president of a community group. Others discover an ability to lead through local advocacy efforts. Once bitten, they decide to take on a wider role through public office. With time and opportunity, many of them successfully make the transition from local to regional, state to national public office.

The flipside is that unsuccessful GLBT candidates do not generally have a history or record of extensive community involvement before deciding to run. Their decision is often made spontaneously, or because they believe they enjoy high recognition within their electorate already. Unfortunately, candidates who are open about their sexuality, but have not "paid their dues" laboring in the community, often find themselves judged exclusively on their sexuality, rather than on what they bring to the community as a whole.

Concern. Lesbian, gay and bisexual candidates exhibit a concern for all community issues, not just those of the homosexual neighborhood. GLBT candidates are well briefed on local issues, and understand what is on the minds of their neighbors and constituents, whether it be property taxes, utility rates or veteran's benefits. Successful candidates refuse to surrender any ground to their opposition.

One Vermont gay legislator shared his belief that gays and lesbians should become more active in their local schools. Most lesbians and gays choose not to do so, for somewhat obvious reasons. This legislator highlighted that, for the heterosexual community, school-centered activity – weekend sports, PTA meetings, graduation ceremonies, car pooling – often provides the majority of social interaction within a community. Why, he argued, should the GLBT community cede this important component of neighborhood life?

This also represents a maturing in our political evolution. Gays and lesbians campaigning for office no longer feel the need or urgency to be "one note" candidates, but rather men and women prepared to speak out on broad community concerns.

Coalitions. Successful GLBT candidates are highly skilled at building coalitions. Many of us, because of the circumstances of our lives, have learned how to "get along" with others. Lesbian, gay and bisexual candidates and elected officials use this trait to their political advantage. They spend countless hours working to bring people together.

Whether it be at the local council level or in the halls of Congress, gay, lesbian and bisexual public officials stand out for an

innate ability to achieve consensus with the majority of their colleagues. This is not to suggest that they will sacrifice their moral imperative for the sake of fitting in. Rather, it is that successful GLBT candidates and elected officials have a deep appreciation of the necessity of forming coalitions to "sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Contrast. Gay, lesbian and bisexual candidates welcome the opportunity to contrast themselves with their rivals. This is particularly evident in the way a candidate builds a campaign team. They ignore the natural inclination to be surrounded with similarly minded people. GLBT candidates headed for victory recognize the importance of building a diverse campaign team that reflects contrasting viewpoints and sexual orientation, while united on the common goal of getting the candidate elected.

As a general rule, those GLBT candidates who surround themselves with just gay men or lesbians are more likely than not to find themselves looking in rather than looking out the day after an election.

Canvassing. Candidates determined to win will go anywhere in their search for votes. They are not afraid to openly acknowledge their sexuality – and then canvass door-to-door in tough neighborhoods. Successful GLBT candidates and officials recognize that they will, in office, represent all the people. As a result, their campaigns take no one for granted.

By going door-to-door, GLBT candidates put a human face on their sexuality. They understand it is more difficult to reject someone on your stoop than on your television screen. And gay candidates know a rival's lawn sign does not necessarily mean everyone in a household is implacably opposed to their candidacy. Often women – particularly those who are pro-choice – will have a differing opinion from their husbands. Successful candidates make no assumptions, and take no one for granted.

In 2002, we're still a long way from achieving our rightful representation at every level of public office. The good news is that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender candidates are achieving success at an unprecedented rate by learning from our political giants who pioneered the path. One day, we shall overcome.

David Phelps

David Phelps is a political campaign consultant and writer, living in Palm Springs, CA. He is completing a book on how to successfully run for office as a GLBT candidate and can be contacted at outsp@aol.com.