Gays on Guard

By Bob Evancho

When asked in early January about the threat of an anti-gay measure in Idaho, Brian Bergquist half-kiddingly advised his fellow gays to "get active, or decide which concentration camp you want to go to."

A week later, circumstances dictated a more serious tone.

In 1992 Idaho gays and lesbians watched — from what appeared to be a safe distance — the proceedings in nearby Oregon and Colorado as anti-gay initiatives were put before the voters of those states. Then, after Oregon's Measure 9 was defeated and Colorado's Amendment 2 was approved in November, the regional focus seemed to turn toward Idaho.

Proponents of the failed Oregon initiative were reportedly gearing up for a similar push in the Gem State. And following weeks of speculation and whistling in the dark, Idaho gays no longer have an enigmatic foe, but an actual adversary — the Idaho Citizens Alliance.

On Jan. 13 at the Idaho Statehouse, the ICA, a spin-off of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the primary sponsor of the highly controversial Measure 9, announced its formation. OCA chairman Lon Mabon stated the new "family values" organization would spearhead a campaign to place a similar anti-gay measure on Idaho's ballot in 1994. Kelly Walton, a Burley contractor who worked for the OCA from 1986-91, will head the Idaho group.

Bergquist's gallows humor no longer seemed funny; the whistling in the dark didn't work. Suddenly, right in Idaho's midst is a faction that Newsweek magazine called "the voices of hate." Almost overnight, the struggle for gay rights in Idaho has taken on a new, more urgent meaning. Already working within the context of an unaccommodating straight world, Idaho gays now face a strident opponent seeking to limit their rights.

"If this group does what it did in Oregon," Bergquist says of the ICA, "it's pretty well spelled out what we will be doing for the next two to four years: We'll be spending half our time dispelling lies, distortions and half-truths."

With their consciousness-raising efforts limited to fair booths and gay-pride parades, most Boise gays have considered quiet assimilation as the best method for gaining mainstream acceptance. But the gauzy gauzy has been thrown down and the unobtrusive approach will no longer work. Not now — not with the ICA and its $500,000 budget and virulently anti-gay agenda looming.

The birth of the ICA and the sociopolitical developments in Oregon and Colorado —
Oregon anti-gay measure

GALA
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Protect gay rights
HUMAN RIGHTS

Native activist may
or anti-gay legislation

boycott broadens
Denver convention over Amendment 2
both generally considered more liberal and politically progressive than Idaho — should tell Boise's gay community that preventing "another Amendment 2" will require united action.

Which is precisely what Bergquist and other gay and human-rights activists intend to do. "A lot of people are angry and hurt," says Bergquist, assistant director of the BSU Student Union, "but a lot of people, including many non-gay people, have already said they want to do something. And I think some of them aren't the type who normally get involved in these kinds of issues. We need them.

We plan to establish a broad-based coalition to battle this."

Perhaps one reason for the show of support by some straight is the notion that the "I" in ICA stands for interfering or intruding. It's worth noting, says Bergquist, that the "Idaho" organization's initial incorporators are from Oregon.

"If they think coming into Idaho and promoting their beliefs is going to be a piece of cake, they're sadly mistaken," Bergquist says. "My experience is that you set up at the grass-roots level and organize and affiliate with from within ... I think that's part of the ethic of the West that Idahoans have; they don't like outside influences telling them what to do. I think a lot of Idahoans viewed the [1990] abortion issue the same way.

In addition, Bergquist predicts the ICA's anti-gay crusade will further galvanize much of the Boise gay community. Unfortunately, he adds, not all Boise gay are ready to take a stand.

"It's kind of the 'GIMFU' attitude, you know: 'I got mine, forget you,'" he says. "There are a lot of [Boise-area gay] people who are quite comfortable in their lifestyles. There are a lot of people ... who have been quite professionally successful, and have a lovely home and their own circle of friends; they've never seen any reason to get involved with gay and lesbian activism at all."

As its begins its strategy, the ICA seems to be coming from two frames of reference. The first: If it failed in Oregon, it might work next door. The second: If we got it approved in Colorado, we can get it done in Idaho.

Colorado's Amendment 2, which was approved by a 53-47 percent margin, prohibits state and local civil rights protection based on sexual orientation. The amendment also invalidates several existing city ordinances that protect gay rights and prohibits recognition of gay as a minority group. On the same day, Oregon's more restrictive Measure 9 was defeated. And given Idaho's conservative reputation, there are those who believe the Gem State is fertile ground for another political anti-gay crusade. But Idaho isn't alone: Ten other states are targeted by the conservative groups that were behind the Colorado and Oregon initiatives.

Needless to say, homosexuality is one of the most emotionally intense human rights issues facing our society today. And it seems the Boise area has been embroiled in its share of gay and gay-related controversies in recent months. Consider what occurred in and around Idaho's capital in 1992:

- In April, at the height of a debate about including "sexual orientation" in Boise State's anti-discrimination statement, The Arbiter, the BSU student newspaper, reports a hate message written in chalk on the sidewalk in front of the Hemingway Center. The message read, "KILL THE FACS."
- In June, critics lash out at a press by the American Civil Liberties Union of Idaho and gay rights groups for legal recognition of "domestic partnerships" in the state.
- In two separate incidents in the fall, patrons of the Emerald Club are attacked as they leave the Boise bar, which is frequented by gays. (And in reality, says Bergquist, the number of assaults against gays is much higher than the number reported.)
- In November, three Meridian High School teachers are summarily suspended by school officials for allowing three lesbian parents to speak to students about parenting — even though the teachers follow the accepted procedures for presenting guest speakers in the classroom.

Despite Idaho's reputation as a stronghold of traditional religious beliefs and conservative political leanings, the gay community in Boise continues to become a larger and more visible segment of the city's social fabric. But it's those elements of intolerance — whether they are real or imagined — that have many Boise gays worried about the ICA's efforts to limit their rights with a Measure 9-type initiative or legislation.

Measure 9 sought to amend the state's constitution and prohibit gays from receiving the same anti-discrimination status afforded other minorities. It also sought to define homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse."

What concerns many Idahoans, straight and gay, is the potential for a replay of the bitter debate that Measure 9 created in Oregon last year. While the proponents of the initiative claimed they are trying to stem the tide of immoral sodomites who were flaunting their lifestyle, gay and human-rights activists labeled the OCA a powerful cadre of far-right, hate-mongering fundamentalists who were trying to turn religious dogma into public policy. The initiative was defeated by 13.6 percentage points.

Walton, 36, says part of the reason for the proposal's failure was because it was "too strident" in its language. As the ICA's chair, he hopes to learn by the mistakes of those who pushed for Measure 9.

"First of all," he says, "I was not pleased with the wording of Measure 9. To define [gays] as 'abnormal and perverse' was not necessary. That just made the whole issue inflammatory. People didn't need to fight over that. It was already a hot issue, why throw gasoline on it?"

Walton, who moved to Burley to help with his family's business, says the issue of civil rights would be the "centerpiece" of the measure he will seek in Idaho. "Should a segment of our society have special status based on its behavior rather than a social injustice like what blacks and [American] Indians were [subjected to]?"] he asks.

"Blacks have worked long and hard to earn their minority status. I don't think [gays] should receive the same status based on what they do in bed. ... I think legislation
Development, told the Idaho Statesman that "Denver has already lost $7 million in business as out-of-staters protest Amendment 2."

The loss of revenue that Colorado's anti-gay measure has created in that state has not been felt on many Idahoans, especially those who stand to lose the most. Ketchum gallery owner Richard Kavosh told the Wood River Journal that tourism "would bear the brunt" of a boycott against Idaho. "Intolerance is a very difficult image to counteract; once it's in the hopper, and Idaho already has enough problems with the skinheads up north."

But talk of a boycott is probably jumping the gun, says Associated Press reporter Mark Warbis, who points out that it would take about 32,000 signatures to place a measure on the next state election ballot. And the chances of such a measure being discussed — let alone introduced — during the 1993 Legislative session are just as slim, he adds. Part of the reason, Warbis observes, is that party lines may not be an accurate indicator of Idaho's political climate in regard to gay rights.

He notes that despite the Republican Party's major gains in November's general election, many of its candidates steered clear of ultraconservative agendas.

"For the most part, the state's Republican leadership is more moderate than before and has moved more toward the center," says Warbis, a BSU graduate. "And given the defeat of a number of legislators who supported restrictive abortion legislation in the 1990 session, I also think the conservative faction of the GOP will be less willing to legislate morality."

Part of the reason is because the acrimony of the failed 1990 anti-abortion measure still lingers, and both sides are reluctant to recenter another moral thicket. "And frankly," adds Warbis, "the 1993 Legislature is not going to have time for gay legislation" — pro, anti- or otherwise.

"Issues like that are always time consuming, this Legislature is going to be facing a push for property tax reform, digging out of a $14 million Medicaid deficit, and school reform," he comments.

Some of Idaho's politicians already have

Boise State's Bergquist: "We'll be spending half our time dispelling lies, distortions and half-truths."