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Grassroots Activists Demand Marriage Equality

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PHOTO: PAM I'ANSON

Michael Moore mocks it, gay rights activists fear it and religious conservatives control it. Yet, on Saturday, May 30, 2009, over 3,000 LGBT community members and their allies flocked to the conservative town of Fresno, Calif. to Meet in the Middle For Equality (MITM).

Their goal was simple: raise awareness about the importance of supporting LGBT equality in middle-America-type communities. Through grassroots organization and the power of the Internet, MITM did just that.

Kate Baldrige, one of the MITM organizers, had lived openly in San Francisco, but chose to be closeted again when she moved back to her hometown of Fresno. In a town that had a 70 percent "Yes" Vote on Proposition 8 – California's 2008 ban on gay marriage – it's no surprise that most LGBT community members in Fresno don't feel safe. However, that evening, Baldrige found an inspiring group of activists that were not only living out and proud, but also fighting to protect others' rights to do the same.

In early March Baldrige attended Camp Courage, a grassroots organizing training camp run by the Courage Campaign, where she met Robin McGehee. McGehee had been forced out of her position as PTO president and had to transfer her son to a different school after she spoke out against Prop. 8. Seeing her son's emotional trauma inspired McGehee to attend Camp Courage. McGehee began building what was the first statewide effort to bring people to one spot for LGBT issues. After McGehee told her story, Baldrige and the other attendees each pledged to bring one other person on board, and thus a movement was born.

After that meeting, Baldrige, McGehee and the others drove their trusty minivans to every corner of the state, encouraging people to "Meet in the Middle" the Saturday following the California Supreme Court ruling on Prop. 8. Everywhere they went, they were greeted with the same question: "Why Fresno?"

The answer: The activists behind MITM believe that LGBT members should not have to flee their hometowns to find equality. The future of the LGBT rights movement is not in the gay meccas of San Francisco or Los Angeles, but in the smaller conservative communities that struggle to understand LGBT individuals. "In Fresno, we felt like a gay ghetto with no support," Baldrige says. "Never again will places like Fresno be left out of this push for equality."

Over 50 community organizations agree. By joining forces with human rights groups such as the United Farm Workers and Planned Parenthood, MITM became about equality for all, not just those directly affected by the Prop. 8 ruling. For this reason, MITM started their day in Selma, Calif., which shares its name with Selma, Ala., the location of three pivotal civil rights movement marches. Led by human rights activists, including Reverend Eric Lee from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, protestors marched the 15 miles from Selma to Fresno. For the last mile the marchers were joined by married LGBT couples, and when they reached the rally stage the crowd parted and cheered.

"The pain that is in my feet, in my knees and in my back is nothing compared to the pain of discrimination that you're going through now," Reverend Lee said in his speech to the crowd. "And I'll walk another 15 miles, and another 15 miles, and another 15 miles, until we have marriage equality."

During the rally, Reverend Lee shared the stage with celebrities Eric McCormack, TR Knight, Dustin Lance Black and Michelle Clunie, along with activists Lt. Daniel Choi, Layne Soares, Rick Jacobs and Cleve Jones. The crowd was saddened at the ruling of the California Supreme Court, which upheld Prop. 8 but maintained the validity of the 18,000 same-sex couples already married, but they were also inspired by the opportunities of the future.

"Rather than become disabled by our grief," McGehee said, "we must shift our shame to strength and revitalize for the sake of the entire American LGBT community."

"It's not just about marriage equality, it's about full rights for everyone," Cleve Jones said using Harvey Milk's historic megaphone. In his closing speech, Jones encouraged all 3,000 participants to join him at the National Equality March in Washington, D.C. on October 10, 2009 a "Meet in the Mall" to demand federal recognition of LGBT equality.

Rallies like Meet in the Middle and the National Equality March owe their success to their grassroots community involvement. "We don't have a lot of money or resources," Baldrige said, "but what we do have is a community of volunteers who put together a successful event in their spare time."

For more information, or to donate visit meetinthemiddle4equality.com and for tips on how you can become involved in your community, visit couragecampaign.org.