Join the (Diminishing) Impact

December 22, 2008 By Peter Staley

Momentum is a bitch. It?s probably the hardest thing to maintain in any activist movement. Join The Impact, the new web-based group that organized the remarkable nationwide anti-Prop 8 rallies on November 15th, is learning this hard truth pretty quickly. Their three actions since then ? a postcard campaign, ?Day Without A Gay?, and Saturday night?s nationwide ?Light Up The Night? demos ? failed to live up to this group?s early promise, or its justifiably glowing press coverage (see their New York Times profile).

This is not meant to be a dig. I?m in love with this group?s energy, youthfulness, and commitment. I haven?t felt this inspired by gay activism since the days of ACT UP. But I?m also a big believer in learning as you go, and doing honest postmortems. Any movement that only pats itself on the back after each action it takes is doomed to failure. So at the risk of having my head bitten off, I?d like to humbly offer the following advice.

Momentum matters. The best way to maintain it is to set and achieve attainable goals (or mini-victories that push the ball forward towards a larger victory). Thus far, Join The Impact only seems to be playing variations on a theme, attempting to recreate new versions of their clear victory on November 15th.

As amazing as that day was, it should be kept in perspective. It was a highly emotional response to a singular event, the passing of Prop 8. As a community, we were stunned, hurt and angry. As with most emotional responses, they will tend to diminish as you get further and further away from the initial event. November 15th was a singular moment, and attempting to recreate it will be as futile as attempting to recreate the Stonewall Riots.

Join The Impact doesn?t have ACT UP?s secret weapon ? the monthly funerals that continually refueled our anger ? so it needs to adjust to its post-November reality. They can?t keep banking on the initial emotions we all felt immediately after the Prop 8 vote. That probably means they should drop nationwide, broad-focus events for now, and start finding specific targets with potential mini-victories to push the ball forward.

One can think of dozens of targets. We could hit Rick Warren with various actions and specific demands, like an apology for comparing us to pedophiles and a commitment to stop the ex-gay ministry programs at his church. For a good action against him, try dozens of wedding-attired gay couples walking down his church?s aisle during one of his Sunday sermons. They could eventually crowd in front of the pews, quietly whispering their vows and exchanging rings and kisses, while never officially disturbing the sermon (one of ACT UP?s greatest mistakes).

The targets and potential mini-victories are as numbered as our enemies. Focus on the states where gay marriage is an attainable goal in the next few years: California, New York, and New Jersey. There are

specific people and institutions in each that are standing in our way. If creatively targeted, any of them could become the focus of unwanted news coverage.

But here?s my worry. How will you do effective postmortems and strategize future actions? The Web is a great tool for getting out the word, but it?s a lousy place for brainstorming (sorry, discussion forums are useless for this). There?s simply no digital replacement for a room full of people hashing it out, where everyone?s eyes light up once someone hits on a good idea. Join The Impact doesn?t have ACT UP?s notorious Monday night meetings to debate future actions. Its next step should be picking a city, and finding a big room.

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