

VCRA-Out in Ventura

By Matthew Craffey

It was a cold Friday night in February of 1999. A nervous young man cautiously enters an old building in downtown Ventura, where the Gay & Lesbian Community Center had recently taken residence. He is greeted by 18 other youth, ages 13 to 22 and a facilitator in his mid 20's. This is his first time at the center, his first time at the youth group, and his first step at finally confronting and dealing with a reality he could no longer ignore; he was gay. The young man feared this evening and dreaded its inevitability for some time, but knew that if he didn't at least explore this part of him that he had struggled to repress for so long, he would never be able to move on with his life.

Once settled, and after listening to other's stories in the group, the young man began feeling comfortable enough to start opening up about his feelings that he's kept inside for so long. While a simple concept, this had never happened before in his life. More amazingly, he realized that he that he could talk about such things freely without worrying about being judged, because they too had suffered through a similar struggle. Despite all the stereotypes and ideas of what this night would entail, it would turn out to be the night the young man's life began for the first time; a life in which he no longer hated himself; a life in which he could be who he wanted to be and be with who he wanted to be with; a life in which he had friends who accepted him for who he was; a life in which he wanted to live. This center literally saved this man's life. This man was me.

Depending on your perspective, cause-based community organizations are either an asset or a liability to the community. But the question that emerges is whether these cause-

based community organizations actually have their intended impact on the community they serve. Specifically, I wondered if Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Tran-sexual (LGBT) organizations influence the community they serve to become more supportive of their agenda? If the answer is no, then the conversation over whether these organizations are good or bad for the community loses its relevancy.

In order to gain some insight into the effectiveness of LGBT organizations, this study will examine voting results of issues of several issues that impact the gay community, such as California's Proposition 8. Prop 8 banned gay marriage in a close election. This study will compare how the city of Ventura voted (which has an LGBT organization) with how Thousand Oaks voted (which does not have an LGBT organization). Demographics of both cities are employed due to its role in the results. Since both cities have similar population size and similar demographics, and in addition to being situated in Ventura County this comparison in voting provides insight into the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness of Ventura's LGBT organization.

Because impact on a community is sometimes hard to quantify and because other factors can play a role in elections, this study will compliment voting and demographic analysis with personal interviews with random people in both cities, as well as those who have or have had some connection to the VCRA. Statistics that show the effectiveness of some of the programs employed by the VCRA will also be used to also demonstrate the potential impact and connection to the community.

Demographics of Ventura

The city in which the VCRA resides, is the city of San Buenaventura, which is more commonly referred to as "Ventura". Ventura was founded in 1772 by Franciscan priest, Father

Junipero Serra. The city was officially incorporated in 1866 and became the county seat of Ventura County (Wiki, "Ventura", 2009). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Ventura in 2006 was 104,092, a 3.1 % growth in population since 2000. Persons under 18 years old make up 25% of the population in Ventura, while they make up 27.3 % of the population in the state of California. Persons 65 years old or older make up 12.8 percent of the population, while they make up 10.6% of the population of California overall. Women make up 50.8 % of the population of Ventura, while they make up 50.2% of the population of California overall (2009).

Racial demographics show Ventura to be much less diverse than the overall state of California. White persons make up 78.8% of the population in Ventura, while they make up only 59.9% of the population in the state. Black persons make up 1.4% of the population of Ventura, while they make up 6.7 % of the population of California. Asians make up 3.0 % of the population compared to 10.9% of the population of the state. Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin are 24.3% of the population in Ventura, while they make up 32.4% of the population in California. Person's reporting two or more races is 4.3% for Ventura, 4.7% for the State (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

In Ventura, only 21.5 % of the populace speak a language other than English at home. This compares to 39.5 % statewide. 85.7% have graduated high school, and 29.2% have a bachelor's degree or higher in Ventura, compared to 76.8% and 26.6% respectively for the state. Lastly, as of 1999 (which is the most recent data available) median household income in

Ventura was \$52,298 compared to \$47,493 for the state of California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

As we can see, Ventura appears to be less racially diverse than the state as a whole, while at the same time also being better educated, and more affluent. While also knowing the percentage of the population that identifies as gay in Ventura versus the state of California would likely prove helpful for the research being conducted, such information is not currently available.

Demographics of Thousand Oaks

Compared to Ventura, Thousand Oaks is a relatively young city. It was incorporated in 1964, and only within the past 20-30 years has it seen its population soar to 124,207, a 6.2% growth rate from the year 2000. Thousand Oaks is now more populated than Ventura (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Person's under 18 make up 26% of the populace, only slightly different than the state percentage of 27.3%. Persons over 65 years of age make up 11.1% of the T.O. population, versus 10.6% for the state. Women represent 50.9% of the Thousand Oaks populace, almost the same as the state of California overall. That's where similarities with the state percentages mostly end (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Racially, like Ventura, Thousand Oaks is much less diverse than the state. Whites represent 85.1% of the population, Blacks 1.1%, Asians 5.9%, Hispanics or Latinos 13.1%, and

persons reporting two or more races are 2.8% of the population of Ventura. This compares to 59.5%, 6.7%, 10.9%, 32.4%, and 4.7 % respectively for the State (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Foreign born persons are 15.6% of the population compared to 26.2% for the state. 19.1% of the Ventura population speak a language other than English at home versus 39.5% for the state of California. 91.4% have graduated high school, and 42.2% have a bachelor's degree or higher in T.O. compared to 76.8% and 26.6% respectively for the state. Lastly, as of 1999 (which is the most recent data available) median household income in Thousand Oaks was \$76,815 compared to \$47,493 for the state of California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

It is clear that the populace of both Ventura and Thousand Oaks is much less diverse but much more affluent and educated than the state of California as a whole. It is also clear that Ventura and Thousand Oaks have much in common demographically. Despite their very different historical significances, in almost every category mentioned above from total population to education, the two cities generate very similar demographical percentages. With the exception of a higher percentage of those with bachelor's degrees or higher in Thousand Oaks, as well as a higher median income, the two cities are pretty well matched.

The Organization

The LGBT organization in Ventura is the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance, or VCRA. Its mission statement is as follows; *“The Ventura County Rainbow Alliance [VCRA] has evolved into a one-stop go-to place for all things LGBT in Ventura County. Registered with the State of California as a non-profit 501(c)(3), we are the only Ventura County community-based organization providing direct client services and programming designed to meet the needs of*

the LGBT communities and those affected by HIV/AIDS. The agency is currently staffed by full-time and part-time employees along with an expanding network of community volunteers.

VCRA is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors that meets monthly to set policy and strategy. Our mission is to promote equality through education and advocacy, offer resources and referrals, provide social services, and support activities which enhance the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and HIV/AIDS-affected individuals, their families and friends in Ventura County” (VCRA website, 2009).

VCRA was founded in 1993, and was originally called the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, or GLCC up until the year 2000. No longer in downtown, the VCRA is now located in the center of Ventura, on Telephone Road near Market Street. I must disclose that the personal impact that the then GLCC made on me was profound. Then, as they do now, the center had a youth group that met every Friday, and other days as well for special occasions. As mentioned earlier, my first exposure to gay life, and people just like me, was through attending one of these youth group meetings in 1999. Prior to that meeting, I had been solidly in the closet, thinking I had nothing in common with what I thought I knew about the gay community. There I met people who had gone through the same struggle, the self-hating, the shame of being gay in a still largely homophobic culture. These were normal, every-day guys and girls, who happened to be gay, just like me. What I would end up learning at those youth group meetings would end up helping me transition from a closeted gay man, to a man that fully embraced who he is. The friendships I made at that youth group continue with me though today, 10 years later. My experience would also empower me to try and change things so that the next generation of youth would not have to endure the same struggle.

I must also disclose that I served on the board of directors at the VCRA from 2000 to 2002. My experience there was mostly positive, though I ultimately left the board because of time constraints but also fatigue related to political and personal in-fighting on the future direction of the VCRA at the time. After years of away from direct involvement in the center, I wanted to find out if the center was making a difference in the community it serves.

The current Executive Director of the VCRA is Jay Smith. He started working at the Center in August of 2005, and became the E.D. in July of 2006. He has a M.A. in Interpersonal Communications, and prior to working at the VCRA, he did media relations in the music industry. The resurgence that the VCRA has experienced since my time on the board can be largely credited to Jay's determination to run the center like a business. For too many years, grant money and donations were squandered on database systems that didn't work, buildings that were too big, programs that weren't effectively serving the community, employee's who weren't held accountable for their work, and boards that could only agree to disagree (Smith, J., 2009). Reyna O'Neil who is a former board member, served on the VCRA board during those dark days. "When the organization was run by men then it was more man centered and when it was run by women, it was more women centered; there never seemed to be a happy balance. There used to be a lesbian mothers group but the board that was more men centered at the time, found it had no value, while the women thought it was of value. The youth felt it was of value too but the board did not care." (2009) Former board member Carmichael Smith-Low recalls those troubling days as well. "I got involved a number of years ago, first as a board member and later as chairman of the board. I initially got involved because of a joint retreat involving the G/L Business organization/chamber and the Center, and was shocked by the lack

of quality and number of persons on the Center's board, despite the impressive work done by the organization. I became chair when the VCRA got involved in the HIV business, as it were, and the county/state would not recognize the VCRA with as dysfunctional a structure as it then operated under." (2009)

That was then, this is now. Today, money is wisely spent on things the center really needs, and on the items designated by the grantor, the center is housed in a building appropriately sized for its operations, programs and services offered that weren't effective have either been changed to be effective or cut, and the organization now spends within its means and nothing more. Lastly, the board is made up of 12 professionals who have the experience and desire to work together and get things done for the good of the organization. The current make-up of the board includes teachers, business leaders, attorneys, those with PhD's, while half are women, one member is straight, and one is Hispanic. Every board member sits on one of three committees, based on what their area of expertise is-Fundraising, Marketing, or Activities (Smith, J., 2009). As Board Chair, Steve Bailey puts it "VCRA has really "professionalized" over the past several years. It has become a respected and influential agency in Ventura County." (2009)

I asked current Board Member and realtor, Blake Mashburn what his thoughts were about the current board make-up. "I believe the VCRA Board to be diverse; the board development committee has worked diligently to that end. It is made up of LGBT individuals, as well as those that would identify as other than LGBT. Additionally the board is made up of men

and women, and many differing political philosophies, religious and non-religious beliefs, as well as varying economic classes, education, career, and racial backgrounds.” (2009)

Steve Bailey had this to say about his involvement with the VCRA, and its impact on the community. “I joined the Board in January, 2009 but have been involved with the agency in some manner or another since its inception. I believe that we need a “center” or a focal point of some sort in Ventura and have been active in trying to build a focus in the community since I arrived here in 1985. Starting with a group called “Gold Coast Couples” in 1986 and with the Gold Coast Bowlers in 1990 my partner and I have been working to bring people together. VCRA has been another avenue that I strongly support. As we are a very diverse community, there needs to be several avenues for people to come together. VCRA is not only a focal point but a great clearing house for our community.” (2009)

Programs offered by the center include a Case Management Program which is designed to assist physical and mental needs of those living in Ventura County who have been diagnosed with HIV and AIDS. They also provide emergency housing, and food to those suffering from HIV and AIDS. The center does STD, and rapid HIV testing multiple days per week, and is available to people who speak English and Spanish. They currently operate a syringe replacement program (syringe use is the second leading cause of HIV infection), the “Smart, Sexy, Safe” sex education program, free legal services, and free mental health and counseling services. As previously mentioned they offer a youth empowerment program, and they also offer a transgender support group (VCRA Website, 2009).

Every year, the VCRA puts together a Pride Festival in Ventura. In the past the festival has been located at the beach, and on Main Street in downtown Ventura. Both locations are very high profile, and attract everyone from straight supporters of the LGBT community, to gay families, to local politicians and business leaders. Over the years this festival has become more and more mainstream for what's often considered to be a fairly conservative county. People from all walks of life are now active in this organization and its events. The key to some of this success has been involving and loyally supporting allies of the LGBT community. Companies and politicians who have supported the VCRA are proudly listed on its website, while steering clear of out and out political endorsements. It is a 501(C)(3) organization after all. Every year they also have their Community Service Award dinner, in which they give awards and recognition to those leaders in the community who have been the biggest supporters of the gay community. The awards are often signed and endorsed by Senator's Boxer, or Feinstein, or various other State and U.S. representatives (VCRA Website, 2009).

Lastly, the VCRA was heavily involved in rallies, vigils, marches, and other activism related to defeating Proposition 8 during the 2008 election. Since its passage, the VCRA has organized several marches from City Hall in Ventura to the beach and back. The VCRA is the only large organization in the county to organize such events.

But does all this activism, community support, and funding translate to creating a more gay-friendly populace? Community organizations in general don't appear to have clear record of success when it comes to influencing the voters of its surrounding community. Part of the problem is that such a direct cause and effect relationship is very difficult to prove, and our test

case will likely prove no exception. However, much useful information as to how these organizations can influence and engage enough of the surrounding community can no doubt be gleaned from this analysis, and hopefully will be able to show us whether the gay community gets back what they put into an organization such as the VCRA.

The Election

The first area of analysis is the political front. One of the most important impacts an organization can have on a community is creating an environment more supportive of the organization's cause. That more supportive environment should also translate to political support. Proposition 8 was the most recent and controversial legislative issue relating to the California gay community, so we'll start there. While a SurveyUSA poll conducted between October 29th and 31st (4 days before the election) showed Prop 8 losing by 3 percentage points, the actual results were 52.24% in support of the initiative, and 47.76% against for the overall state of California (SurveyUSA Poll Shows Prop 8 Losing, 2008).

In Ventura, it was a very different story. According to the Ventura County Elections Office, 24,660 people voted "yes" on Prop 8, versus the 27,088 who voted "no". This works out to roughly 53% of Ventura voting against Prop 8 (2009).

In Thousand Oaks, the results were much tighter. 32,691 people voted "yes" on Prop 8, and 32,126 voted "no", which allowed Prop 8 to squeeze out a roughly 50.5% to 49.5% win. This is much closer than would have suspected, but still amounted to a win for Proposition 8, and that's what really matters (Ventura County Elections Office, 2009).

Besides demographics, which we've already determined are roughly the same for both cities, other factors can obviously affect the outcome of the election besides the existence of the VCRA in Ventura. Obviously political party registration can give some insight into election results, and it's fairly established that Democrats have often been much more sympathetic to gay issues than Republicans, though this does not mean in any way that all Republicans are not sympathetic to gay issues. It was of course Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger who was publicly against Prop 8 during the 2008 election.

While 51,276 of Ventura's 65,557 registered voters are registered as "Republican" or "Democrat", 57% of them are registered Democrats, and only 43% are registered Republicans. One caveat to point out is that historically Republicans have had much lower party registration percentages, but often times registered "Independents" or "Libertarians" vote for Republican causes and candidates, which levels the playing field quite a bit. The bulk of Ventura's remaining 14,281 registered voters fall into these other two party affiliations (Ventura County Elections Office, 2009).

As for Thousand Oaks, 64,817 of the 78,103 voters are registered as Republican or Democrat. Of those 64,817, 34,185 of them are registered as "Republicans" and 25,562 are registered as "Democrats". That comes out to roughly a 14% party registration advantage in favor of Republicans. It is surprising that the vote was as close as it was for T.O. given its significant tilt towards the Republican Party. Of course, like Ventura, Thousand Oaks has a sizable number of voters who don't identify as a "Republican" or a "Democrat". Those 13,286 "Independents" and "Libertarians" might swing the overall electorate to the center (Ventura

County Elections Office, 2009). Unfortunately, no data is currently available as to how these voters voted in Ventura or Thousand Oaks.

What we do know is that many African American voters turned out and voted in the election that had not voted before because of Barack Obama's historic candidacy. According to a CNN exit poll, 75% of African Americans voted for Proposition 8 (CNN Ballot Measures, 2008). In the 2008 election, between 65-70% of eligible African American voters turned out to vote, which was much higher than the average for anyone other voting group (Jill Lawrence, USAToday, 2008). This likely played a bigger role in affecting the overall state outcome on Proposition 8, as African Americans represent 6.7% of the state's population, than it did in affecting the outcome in Ventura or Thousand Oaks. African American's only represent just over 1% of the population in both cities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Latino's make up a larger percentage of the population in both cities; 24.3% in Ventura and 13.1% in Thousand Oaks, so their vote had the potential to steer the vote one way or another (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). However, 53% of Latino's supported Proposition 8, which isn't a large enough margin to greatly impact the overall results in the two cities, but nonetheless could have been the margin of difference in Thousand Oaks which supported Proposition 8 by only 565 more votes (CNN Ballot Measures, 2008).

According to CNN, 53% of men and 52% of women supported Prop 8. Had this been proportionately very different, it might have been behind the different outcomes in Ventura and Thousand Oaks assuming the percentages of men and women living in the two cities were drastically different. This was not the case (CNN Ballot Measures, 2008).

Age groups 18-29, which make up 20% of California voters, opposed Prop 8 60% to 39%. Age groups 30-44, which make up 28% of California voters, supported Prop 8 55% to 45%. Age groups 45-64, which make up 36% of California voters, supported Prop 8 54% to 46%. Voters 65 and older, which make up 15% of the vote, supported Prop 8 61% to 39% (CNN Ballot Measures, 2008). Since Ventura and Thousand Oaks age demographics largely mirror the state age demographics, age likely had little or no effect more on the election results than that of the overall state.

We also know that Mormon Church is confirmed to have spent at least \$9 million in support of the ban in the State of California, and The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization, has donated more than one-million dollars (Boise Weekly, Ray Ring, 2008). Both organizations are active in both cities, but Thousand Oaks seems to have fewer members, despite a larger overall population. According to the LDS website, there are 4 Mormon Churches in Thousand Oaks compared to 5 in Ventura. While Ventura has chapter of the Knights of Columbus, the closest one to Thousand Oaks is in Agoura. According to the Secretary of State's website, 214 Thousand Oaks residents gave a total of \$55,868.38 to "Protect Marriage.com", one of the largest "Yes on 8" organizations (they received a total of \$40,029,571.93 during 2008), compared to 172 Ventura residents that gave a total of \$45,399.00. It's a difference of just over \$10K, but given Thousand Oaks 20,000 larger populace, it's proportionately a very similar amount (California Secretary of State Website, Protectmarriage.com, 2008).

Of course it is always possible that Ventura was already a more tolerant city towards gay issues, regardless of whether there was an LGBT center located within its city limits. However, results from the 1978 election show otherwise. In 1978, the people of California had the opportunity to strip openly gay teachers of the ability to be a teacher. It was called the Briggs Initiative, or Prop 6. While the initiative failed to pass, the results from Thousand Oaks and Ventura closely mirrored each other. Even though Ventura had almost 4,500 more registered Democrats than Republicans (18,986 versus 14,509) and Thousand Oaks had almost 3,000 more registered Republicans than Democrats (15,904 versus 13,163) the results showed that the no vote on Prop 6 was supported by roughly 2,000 more voters in both cities. In Ventura, 11,411 voted yes on Prop 6, while 13,119 voted no. In Thousand Oaks, 9,438 voted yes on Prop 6, and 11,881 voted no (Ventura County Elections Office, 2009). While party registration continues to favor the Democrats in Ventura, and favor the Republicans in Thousand Oaks, what can account for the change in public opinions in both cities in regards to gay issues in the 30 years that separate Prop 6 (1978) from Prop 8 (2008)? Could it be that the social capital created by the VCRA has begun to shift the views of the Ventura voting community in its favor?

Social Capital and Impact on the Community

Beyond changing the political landscape as it relates to LGBT issues, as mentioned before, the VCRA has made sex education, testing, and needle exchange programs a cornerstone of its operation. According to Jay Smith, the Executive Director of the VCRA, the center performed 303 STD/HIV tests in 2008, services 240 active clients in the syringe replacement program, provided over 40,000 new syringes to clients in 2008, and services 130

clients with HIV with mental health and other services. As many as 55 families who earn under \$55,000 a year (\$48,000 if single) with a family member who is HIV positive, are currently receiving food, medicine, and counseling services through the center's Case Management program. In fact, the STD/HIV services have become so effective, AIDS Care, which use to be the primary organization for STD/HIV services, has since disbanded. Since then, all government and foundation funding for these services now goes to the VCRA (2009).

Visibility in the community has also greatly increased over the years, according to Jay. "Pride in the Park" is Ventura's yearly pride festival located in Mission Park in Ventura, and put together by the VCRA. While most other pride festivals charge to attend, and contain booths, and entertainment that would not be suitable for family viewing, the VCRA has carefully managed the event so that it is free to the public, and suitable for families and children of all ages. As a result, almost half of those who attend are straight allies in the community of Ventura, and the number of vendors present at the event has increased from 45 to 72 in 2008 (Smith, J., 2009).

Since taking over all HIV services from AIDS Care, the VCRA has also taken on the yearly Ventura County AIDS Walk for Life event. The walk is a high-profile event that attracts thousands, straight and gay, and helps raise awareness and money for fighting HIV/AIDS. It also attracts high-profile businesses in the community such as Amgen, the VC Reporter, Wells Fargo, and Trader Joe's. Board Chair Steve Bailey feels this is one of the most important events for the LGBT community and the VCRA. "With the demise of AIDS Care many years ago, VCRA took on a whole new major program with AIDS Project Ventura County, providing the services that AIDS

Care had previously provided. This included the annual Walk for Life – which is a rallying point for much of the LGBT and the non-LGBT community. It’s an opportunity for the LGBT community to reach out and bring in “friends” who support what VCRA is doing.” (Bailey, S., 2009)

Jay Smith says events with the Gay Men’s Chorus of Ventura County (set in Thousand Oaks to try and fill the void of not having a gay organizations in East Ventura County), and cultural events sponsored by the center such as the play “The National Pastime”, a story set in Cuba about the gay son of a member of the Castro regime, and his lover, all help show the larger community of Ventura what the LGBT community is all about. The VCRA also partners with other organizations in the community such as Planned Parenthood, and discusses issues that effect both organizations, and issues that members of both organizations can work together on (Smith, J., 2009).

An area of impact close to Jay’s heart is youth programs and awareness. As mentioned earlier, when Jay started at the center in 2005, the center was in a state of malaise. When it came to the Youth Empowement Program, funding was provided by United Way, and Public Health, which attached strings to what the VCRA could and could not talk about in its youth group meetings. Abstinence had to be the first line of defense against contracting STD’s, no discussion of drug usage was allowed, and a whole host of topics facing LGBT youth were off the table. As a result, the once thriving program that existed when I was there had dwindled down to two active members. Jay says the first solution to the program was to raise money on their own to support the program, rather than take grants with strings attached. He brought in

administrators with experience in helping youth, and they added a mental health component to the program. Now during each two hour meeting, from 7 to 9pm every Friday, youth spend a good part of the meeting broken up in groups known as “councils.” Youth have choice of being members of the Political Action council, Events council, or Advocacy council. These councils help train the youth members on how to be safe, healthy, active members of the community, and also how to be effective leaders and agents for change in the community. A mental health provider is now available during the meetings for youth to talk to at any point. The meetings also focus attentions on important issues that affect gay youth such as safe sex, and drug and alcohol abuse. As a result of the changes made by Jay and others at the VCRA, the Youth Empowerment Program now has 50 active members (Smith, J., 2009).

Not content to just learn how to be leaders, or be active in the community development, the youth are part of highly visible events in the community of Ventura. The group regularly participates in fun activities such as bowling at Buena Lanes in Ventura, playing miniature golf at Golf n’ Stuff, going to the movies and also doing public car washes to raise money to be able to do all these activities. These activities give youth an opportunity to be seen and interact with the general community in a way that shows they are just like anyone else. It also helps build their confidence to be who they are in public. The youth group also produces the Gender Bender Ball at California State Channel Islands, Fashion Week, and numerous other events. Lastly, they were involved in Proposition 8 demonstrations before and after the election, though not quite in the numbers Jay would have liked (Smith, J., 2009).

Another component of the VCRA's youth out-reach, is education of those who aren't involved with the center. In 2008, members of the VCRA did over 200 speaking engagements at schools, educating students on what it is to be gay, and letting them know that words and actions have a consequence. There is no better illustration of this point than the February 12, 2008 murder of 15 year old Lawrence King. Because Lawrence had asked a fellow male student to be his Valentine, the 14 year old student walked into the Green School's computer lab in Oxnard, and shot Lawrence in the head twice. Lawrence had been a member of the VCRA's youth group for about a year, and he had come to terms with who he was in a remarkable way for his age. But what this experience taught the VCRA, and the LGBT community at large is that they couldn't just focus inward on educating and training those who are a part of the VCRA, or members of the LGBT community. They must also focus outward on the larger, straight community of Ventura. Unless the VCRA's message of tolerance and acceptance reaches the larger public, and makes them look differently at the issues that affect LGBT members, tragedies such as the murder of Lawrence will continue to take place. Beyond going into classrooms and teaching students to be more tolerant towards their fellow gay students, the VCRA has reached out to teachers and schools as well. One of the issues that came out of the Lawrence King case was that the school knew that Lawrence was being taunted and teased for some time, but never reported it to his parents or authorities. The VCRA is advocating that schools take action at the first signs of bullying. The recent suicides of gay teens in Massachusetts and Georgia due to bullying show this is an ongoing problem all over this country. There are signs that things are changing though. While school districts in Oxnard have largely not been receptive to the efforts of the VCRA, likely due to cultural and religious

objections to LGBT issues stemming from the largely Hispanic and Catholic make-up of the Oxnard populace, individual teachers have been contacting the VCRA for training on what to do when they suspect they have a gay student in their class. The actions taken by these teachers may end up saving lives. And while the Oxnard School District has been somewhat resistant to efforts for education by the VCRA, the Ventura and Port Hueneme School Districts have been completely supportive and have fully cooperated with the efforts of the VCRA (Smith, J., 2009).

The VCRA doesn't plan to end there either. They are currently working on creating a program called the Youth Advocacy Project which will pull together the federal guidelines, and requirements for kids and adults to be empowered to create GSA's in high-schools, and at a minimum, have a LGBT advocate for each middle-school and junior-high. Jay Smith says he knows the chances of pushing for GSA's in middle-school and junior-high is likely an uphill battle due to the controversial nature of these issues in relation to youth, but he believes as students come out at younger and younger ages, a minimum of having an advocate present and proper education in relation to these issues, will need to be available (Smith, J., 2009). These efforts by the VCRA will not only serve to educate and change the dynamic of many schools in the area as it relates to LGBT issues, but it will also almost certainly expand the center's ever growing social capital through the high-profile nature of these initiative, and the exposure and services it will be providing to educators, students, and parents.

While Jay Smith admits that it's hard to quantify the VCRA's success, there are some indications that the services offered by the VCRA are having a profound impact on the community beyond just influencing political attitudes. For one thing, STD stats show Ventura

County to be below the state average when it comes to contracting STD's. In 2007, the State average for counties in California reporting new cases of Chlamydia was 378.4 per every 100,000 people. The rate was 144.1 in Ventura, which was a 24.6% decrease from the year prior. The State average per 100,000 people contracting Gonorrhea was 82.6, while Ventura was 22. The State average per 100,000 people contracting Syphilis was 5.4, where as it was 2.2 for Ventura County (California Department of Public Health, 2008). Statistics were only available for Ventura County as a whole, so there wasn't a way to compare what the rates were for the city of Ventura, compared to the city of Thousand Oaks. It is worth mentioning that according to a Google search of free clinics in Thousand Oaks, there are no truly free, anonymous STD/HIV testing clinics there. Depending on your financial and insurance situation, there are a few places that will test you free of charge, but the average citizen in Thousand Oaks would not meet that criteria. I have known several people who live in Thousand Oaks, who have driven to the VCRA simply to utilize their testing services.

Perhaps the best testament to the social capital the VCRA has built in the larger community of Ventura, is the number of straight allies that volunteer with the VCRA and support its causes. According to Jay Smith whether it's board membership, or employment at the center, straight allies are stepping up to assist the VCRA. Even more impressive is that fact that straight allies, who organized through the VCRA with offices in each city in the County, accounted for $\frac{3}{4}$ of those involved in protests and marches related to Proposition 8. He's humbled and amazed at the efforts of straight allies to take the time, money, and energy, to be involved in an issue that doesn't even directly affect them. Fifteen or twenty years ago, such solidarity did not exist, and it is likely through the outreach in services, education, events, and

programs offered by the VCRA, that more and more people in the community have been touched by the VCRA, have become aligned with its mission, and supportive of its cause. Once an organization many business owners would not want to be tied to and politicians would like to avoid, the VCRA has received strong support from such politicians such as Congresswoman Lois Capps, and the mayors of Ventura and Oxnard, as well as the police chiefs from Oxnard, Port Hueneme, and Ventura. Behavioral Health and Public Health work with the VCRA on a daily basis now, and businesses such Capriccio's Ristorante openly sponsor and support the center. The center is no longer a place, and a cause people would rather ignore.

Winning the support of the larger community of Ventura, not just the LGBT community is vital not only for greater acceptance of LGBT issues, but for the survival of the VCRA and other LGBT organizations. The unfortunate reality is the number of LGBT organizations in the United States is contracting, not expanding. According to Jay Smith, as acceptance grows in this country for LGBT issues, those under the age of 28 who identify as LGBT are turning to other avenues such as Facebook, and other electronic social networking sites to meet people, and educate themselves. Those above the age of 50 are often too disillusioned to believe LGBT organizations will be able to be an agent of change, simply because they have lived through harsh discrimination, and see that change is happening far too slowly. Most in the LGBT community will not financially support LGBT centers if they are not utilizing its services. The only group that remains active is the 28 to 50 year olds, and that isn't enough to keep many of these organizations active and relevant. Another reason for the struggle is the constant legal battles and election cycles that siphon money to organizations created specifically to deal with the issue at hand, such as Equality California that was formed in order to try to defeat

Proposition 8, and away from organization such as the VCRA. At the start of the Prop 8 campaign, there were 76 LGBT organizations in the United States. By the end of the campaign, there were only 70 (Smith, J., 2009). Six had closed due to a loss in funding. Even the VCRA is considering cancelling its yearly Pride in the Park this year because of the amount of money they had to spend on Prop 8 events, and because many people choose to donate to Anti-Prop 8 groups this past year, rather than to the VCRA. This is an unfortunate trend that shows no signs of stopping. Also, while there is a large LGBT community in Ventura County, Jay says there is also a self-inflicted homophobia that exists among the LGBT community there, and keeps many from being active in causes that directly impact their lives. Ultimately, he believes that the support from the straight community in Ventura has been amazing and necessary part of the success of the VCRA, but that the gay community will need to step up more, and do more of the heavy lifting if that progress is to continue, and if they hope to remain relevant (Smith, J., 2009). He drives home the point that if organizations such as the VCRA cease to exist, who will fill the void? Who will be there to educate and alert citizens in regards to issues such as bullying and the tragedy of Lawrence King, who will be there to offer STD testing services, care for those with HIV, or provide a safe place for gay youth? Steve Bailey, the VCRA Board Chair says “support from the passive members of the LGBT community – those who really don’t need VCRA for socialization or support, is crucial. We need to convey the message that supporting VCRA is essential to their lives as much as it is to those who come to us for basic support needs. VCRA is the voice of the community and can and should be a significant force in conveying the LGBT message to the rest of the community – and that impacts **ALL** of the LGBT community, even those who don’t realize it.” He also makes the case that the LGBT community needs a

spokesperson and advocate in the media, both of which the VCRA provides. “VCRA provides a focal point for information about the LGBT community for the media – case in point: the Larry King tragedy. It was VCRA that provided the “voice” of the LGBT community for the media. VCRA was also a key player in the No on 8 Campaign – also bringing to the community at large a picture of the LGBT community that many had not seen before – committed couples and families that are not all that different from them. I believe that VCRA has been, and will continue to be, a major player in the image and advancement of Ventura’s LGBT community.” (2009)

To get a sense of what the communities of Ventura and Thousand Oaks think about LGBT issues, the value of having a center like the VCRA and other questions, I went to two Ralph’s grocery stores; one at 1776 S. Victoria Avenue in Ventura, and the other at 583 N. Ventu Park Rd, in Thousand Oaks. The grocery store is public place that should capture a good representation of the general public in that city. I interviewed 10 people from each store. To try and find a sample representative of the overall population of each city, I based who I interviewed on race and gender. This means for Ventura and Thousand Oaks, I interviewed 7 white persons, 2 Hispanics, and 1 Asian. At both locations, half of those interviewed were women.

For Ventura, the results showed that 5 out of 10 of those I asked had were at least “somewhat familiar” with the VCRA. 7 out of 10 thought having the VCRA or an organization similar to it is a “positive thing for the community”, 1 believed it “made no difference”, and 2 believed it had a “negative impact”. One of the respondents, a white woman named Julie said

“while I’ve never had any personal involvement with the VCRA, I think it’s great that we have an organization like them in our community.” Robert, a white male disagrees; “I think organizations that bring special attention to certain groups is divisive. Why not focus on the needs of all people?”

When asked if they or someone they knew could ever benefit from the services and efforts of the VCRA, 6 said “yes”, 1 said “maybe” and 3 said “no”. Gustavo, a Hispanic male said “my cousin is gay, and it’s been really tough for his family to deal with. I think it’s good that there are places outside the home where kids like him can go to meet people and find support. He’s a good kid...it’s not his fault society is the way it is.” Joyce, an Asian woman feels differently. “I think because society is the way it is, I can’t imagine someone wanting to draw attention to their sexuality by being involved with an organization like that.”

Lastly, I asked them what their attitudes were towards LGBT issues. I also asked if having direct interaction with an organization could influence their views related to the issues affecting that organization. For the first question, 8 of the respondents said they were “supportive” of LGBT issues, 1 was “unsupportive”, and 1 refused to say either way. Of course it was a broad question, and while all of those who chose “supportive” said they support full-equality, a few such as Nancy said “I think there can be equality without marriage.” With the second question, 7 respondents said they do think that direct interaction with an organization could influence their views related to the issues effecting that organization, while 3 said it would have “no effect”.

In Thousand Oaks, there were slightly different results. The results showed that only 3 out of 10 of those I asked had were at least “somewhat familiar” with the VCRA. 6 out of 10 thought having the VCRA or an organization similar to it, is a “positive thing for the community”, 2 believed it “made no difference”, and 2 believed it had a “negative impact”. One of the respondents, a white man named David said “I’m not very familiar with what the VCRA does, but community outreach is never a bad idea.” Veronica, a Hispanic woman strongly disagrees; “I think these organizations indoctrinate...they want to brainwash our children. God is very clear when it comes to these issues.”

When asked if they or someone they knew could ever benefit from the services and efforts of the VCRA, 4 said “yes”, 2 said “maybe” and 4 said “no”. Eric, an Asian male said “I’m gay and I’m thankful that there is an organization like the VCRA proudly representing us, and helping to educate others.” Sheila, a white woman, supports the idea of the VCRA but says “I have lived here my entire life and never have heard of this organization, nor have I known anyone that has obtained its services.”

I asked them what their attitudes were towards LGBT issues. I also asked if having direct interaction with an organization could influence their views related to the issues affecting that organization. For the first question, 7 of the respondents said they were “supportive” of LGBT issues, and 3 were “unsupportive”. With the second question, 5 respondents said they do think that direct interaction with an organization could influence their views related to the issues affecting that organization, while 3 said it would have “no effect”, and 2 said they “don’t know.”

I also asked 2 extra questions of Thousand Oaks respondents. The first was whether or not Thousand Oaks needs an organization like the VCRA, and the second was if they believe that because Thousand Oaks doesn't have a LGBT organization, it's likely not as supportive of LGBT issues or individuals. For the first question, 5 said "yes" that Thousand Oaks needs a LGBT organization, 2 said they "don't know", and 3 said "no". For the second question, 5 said "yes", 1 said they "didn't know" and 4 said "no". Edgar, a Hispanic male said "I think it's possible. There's a lot of ignorance out there. Until you have a personal connection to this issue, you're likely not going to be very supportive." From the respondent's answers, it does appear that there's less acceptance and support for the LGBT community in Thousand Oaks compared to Ventura, and similarly less familiarity with LGBT organizations. When I spoke Steve Bailey at the VCRA, I asked him the same question about the effect that not having a LGBT center in East Ventura County has had on the community there. "Clearly, Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley and the other East Ventura County cities aren't seen as welcoming to the LGBT community as Ventura is. Whether or not a separate LGBT community center would change that, I really can't say. What I would rather like to see is more involvement from those communities in the existing VCRA and an expansion of the existing VCRA to include activities in that part of our county." (2009)

Former board member Reyna O'Neil echoes those sentiments; "The consequences are dire, there is no support system for that community who need a safe place – they are torn between LA and Ventura." (2009) Carmichael Smith-Low, another former board member had this to say; "Clearly, T.O. youth - not having drivers' licenses and Ventura County having a dysfunctional transportation system, do not have the advantages of the Youth Group. Likewise,

financially challenged persons who use the various social services provided by the Center, from HIV education to food bank to needle-exchange, do not have access to these services. When I was on the board, discussions were had about expanding to the Conejo Valley, but there were never sufficient resources with which to do this.” (2009)

From all the research, interviews, and statistics, it does appear that a strong case can be made for the social capital of the VCRA, and the impact it is having on not only the LGBT community, but the larger community of Ventura as well. We’ve also seen what appears to be the consequence of not having a LGBT organization in a community, as is the case with Thousand Oaks. While both cities are demographically very similar and both appeared to be very similar politically when it came to gay issues in 1976, a shift has occurred in the public and political attitudes in Ventura in support of the LGBT community since then. Meanwhile, Thousand Oaks has remained less supportive, as demonstrated by the election results of Prop 8 in 2008. The variety of services and events offered by the VCRA are reaching more and more people each year, creating more allies within the larger Ventura community as evidenced by the amount of straight allies involved in the Prop 8 rallies. STD/HIV testing and education seems to be working as Ventura County has a much lower than average rate of new STD cases. And finally, the community interviews I conducted seem to show a general familiarity to, appreciation of, and acceptance of what the VCRA stands for, and promotes within the community.

Bibliography

- I. *Ventura County Rainbow Alliance website.* <http://lgbtventura.org/index.php>
- II. *Ventura, California. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2009, from the STS Wiki:*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ventura,_California
- III. *U.S. Census Bureau Website. (2009). State & County QuickFacts. San Buenaventura, California.* <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0665042.html>
- IV. *U.S. Census Bureau Website. (2009). State & County QuickFacts. Thousand Oaks, California.* <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0678582.html>
- V. *Smith, J. (2009).*
- VI. *O'Neil, R. (2009).*
- VII. *Bailey, S. (2009).*
- VIII. *Smith-Low, C. (2009).*
- IX. *The Mad Professah Lectures. (2008, November 22). SurveyUSA Poll Shows Prop 8 losing.* <http://buckmire.blogspot.com/2008/11/surveyusa-poll-shows-prop-8-losing-50.html>
- X. *Ballot Measures: Election Center 2008. (N.D.).CNN. Retrieved March 9th, 2009.*
<http://edition.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#CAI01p1>
- XI. *Lawrence, J. (2008, November). Passionate Voters Drive High Turnout. USA Today.*
http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-11-04-voteturnout_N.htm
- XII. *Ring, R. (2008, October). Prophets and Politics. Boise Weekly.*
<http://www.boiseweekly.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A318379>
- XIII. *California Secretary of State Debra Bowen. (2009). Political Reform/Protectmarriage.com.* <http://cal-access.ss.ca.gov/Misc/error.aspx?aspxerrorpath=/Campaign/Committees/Detail.aspx>

XIV. *California Department of Public Health. (2008). California Local Health Jurisdiction STD summaries, 2007 Provisional Data (July 2008).*

<http://ww2.cdph.ca.gov/data/statistics/Documents/STD-Data-LHJ-StateSummary.pdf>