

25th Anniversary interview with PRA Founder Jean Hardisty, May 2006

(Read the entire interview at PRA's website at: www.publiceye.org)

PRAccess: You founded PRA 25 years ago. Looking back, what do you think its major accomplishments have been?

I'd say my major accomplishment at PRA was to help hold the line against the temptation to exaggerate our research findings or "sex-up" our analysis to attract more attention and money.

I come from an academic background, which is not necessarily a blessing when you work in the movement. But in one sense, it has stood me in very good stead. I acquired a commitment, from some very good teachers and colleagues, to let the story tell itself. Embellishment usually weakens your case. The Right's success is not mysterious. On the contrary, it is understandable. So long as you analyze it accurately, without using demonization, scapegoating, or distortion, you can use that knowledge to defeat its programs.

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PRA's accomplishments are many, I'm proud to say. My bias is to point to our publications — *The Public Eye*, PRA's Activist Resource Kits, the new website, and quite a few books we've published or written — that have provided insight and guidance to quite a few people over the years. But equally important are the thousands of hours of phone conversations, speaking engagements, workshops, and meetings in which we educated the public about the Right. I can't count how many times Chip Berlet has saved an inexperienced reporter from making some dreadful mistakes about the Right, based on bad information. Or how many times PRA staff took the time to give individual attention to someone struggling to grasp the apparently indecipherable right wing. And what may seem a footnote, but impresses me to this day; if you call PRA, you get a person, not a machine.

PRAccess: How can we prevent the Right's accomplishments from being

Continued on page 2

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I write this Executive Director's column, it's just days after the 2006 mid-term elections. Most of this newsletter was written before the results were in — before, even, it was clear that the Democrats would win the House and when there was no hope that they would win the Senate. Everything has changed in just a few weeks making me fear that our content might now be dated. Are the insights from the articles still relevant, or should we start again from scratch?

Actually, I wish, the additional work notwithstanding, that I could say it's all irrelevant now. I wish I could say that everything has changed. Yet the truth is we don't yet know how much has changed.

Certainly the ascension of the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House is an historic moment, as is the election here in Massachusetts of the second elected African American Governor ever. (Though this transplanted Virginian feels compelled to remind you that the *first* elected African American Governor was Doug Wilder, grandson of slaves and Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia!)

On a more political note, a Democratic majority in the House offers the opportunity for increased oversight of an increasingly unchecked, imperial presidency. A Democratic majority in the Senate will likely make a difference in who gets appointed and confirmed to federal judgeships. Beyond that, though, it's hard to know what, if anything, will be different. We know that many of the Democrats who were elected are conservative and many of Republicans who were defeated were moderate. We know that the movement to suppress civil rights and liberties under the guise of protection from terrorism is a train that has picked up great

Continued on page 5

In This Issue...

- A Visit to New Orleans Reveals the Pre-Katrina Crisis 3
- PRA Eyes Pre-Election Tactics of the Christian Right 4
- PRA welcomes Tarso Luís Ramos . . 5
- Growing Threat at UN 5

Interview with Jean Hardisty *continued from page 1*

institutionalized? And how can we stay positive and sustain our efforts?

That's not so difficult a question as it appears. There's hope everywhere when you're working in the progressive movement. The one thing that can be said for times as harsh and discouraging as these is that the policies that serve the wealthy and the empty moralizing that blames low-income people for their poverty are starkly visible if you pay attention. The challenge is to pay attention and then to reach down into your soul for the motivation to commit to the fight against it.

For those who have spent decades in the movement for social justice, we need to do a better job of describing to young people what a good life it is. The work is frustrating and can make you want to scream, but it is also deeply satisfying and enriching, and most of all, the closest many of us will come to leading an ethical life.

I think the principal challenge we face is the loss of a public understanding of the positive role that government can play in society. So much of our vision in the past has rested on using government to correct gross inequities and brutal practices that violate any basic understanding of human rights. One of the Right's major accomplishments is its success in convincing the U.S. public that government is unworthy of support. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when government is in the hands of people who oppose its existence.

We absolutely must come to terms with our own lack of agreement on some fundamental questions that face our movement now. What do we see as the best role for government to play? How can we correct the racial imbalance in the progressive movement that leaves too much power in the hands of white people? What role should religious institutions play in the public sphere? What principles will we use to determine our priorities? The answers should come from younger activists, who are grounded in their own communities and have enough passion to push through the hard work of figuring out not just what

we oppose, but also what we want.

In my years of studying social movements, I've learned that you build social change by recruiting more and more people to your worldview. That's what a successful social movement does. We're seeing that now in certain Latin American countries, where leftist social movements are alive with energy and possibilities. And a successful movement must provide room and an embrace for people who are simply fellow-travelers. A movement made up only of the fervently committed and involved is not a movement but a cadre. Cadres may be very correct, but they almost never bring about profound social change.

To the extent that our issue-specific sub-movements, such as the women's movement, the LGBT movement, or the environmental movement remain indifferent to the large movement for social change, they will claim some accomplishments, but they won't bring about profound change. To do that, we need a vast mobilization around a loosely defined, but clearly progressive, agenda. When lines need to be drawn, they should be drawn over inclusivity, democratic power sharing, and openness to new ideas. These are the places that we should struggle with each other — not about whose issue is more important.

PRAccess: What do you predict from the Right in the near future?

I think the Right has reached a late stage of its own maturity as a movement that threatens its stranglehold on U.S. politics. Knowing that, it is responding as you would expect, by stepping up the pace of political chicanery in order to accomplish as much as possible before the 2008 election.

As a result of its victories in 2000 and 2004, the Right fell into the trap of triumphalism (absurd self-congratulation and an unrealistic sense of power), that led to unrealistic expectations on the part of its followers. Now, unable to deliver on its promises, bogged down in an increasingly unpopular war (itself a manifestation of that triumphalism), it is

reduced to "stealth reform" between now and the 2008 election. That is, rather than succeeding in the legislative arena by passing laws in Congress, it must achieve its platform by using the Executive Branch and an increasingly compliant judiciary to advance its platform.

This is rightist "reform" that will fly under the radar of popular scrutiny but can be devastatingly harmful. We see examples everywhere — including the erosion of civil liberties and privacy protections, the elimination of federal regulatory oversight, and the steady erosion of reproductive rights, especially for low-income women. A period as dangerous as this requires that the progressive movement be especially vigilant and aggressive in challenging this legislation-by-bureaucracy.

PRAccess: What role do you see PRA playing in the future?

I don't know of any organization that knows as much as PRA does about social movements and how they work. Having studied the Right for 25 years and been part of the progressive movement as well, it is a treasure of both academic and experiential understanding of what makes a movement strong.

Now is a time for PRA to stay true to its role as an interpreter of the Right. In that way, it can inoculate liberal and progressive forces from fantasies of magic bullet cures to the Right's dominance. It will also continue to play its standard role of serving as an early warning system on the subject of the Right's plans.

Because PRA has never lost its progressive lens in its years of studying the Right, it will not derive reactionary and compromising lessons from that study. That is perhaps its greatest strength. Because of that strength, I also look forward to seeing PRA play an active role in sorting out the vision for a better, more effective, and more democratic progressive movement.

PRAccess Editor Tom Louie and communications volunteer Sarah Cross conducted this interview.

A Visit to New Orleans Reveals the Pre-Katrina Crisis

By now, I hope everyone has noticed that the Gulf Coast crisis is not so much the result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as of poverty, structural racism, and a stunning lack of leadership. At every level of government and at every stage—before, during, and after the storms—leadership has utterly failed the Gulf Coast. More than a natural disaster, it is, in fact, a social and political catastrophe.

On a visit to New Orleans earlier this year, residents movingly told us that the best way to help them was by going back to our communities and working every day to reveal and eradicate racism and poverty. This, they said, would increase the safety of every citizen and community in both peaceful and disastrous times. This would be true homeland security.

They had found strength and help from regular people being good to each other, rescuing each other, sharing resources and caring for each other, not from FEMA or other government organizations. Even the Red Cross failed in some of the hardest hit areas. Yet many of these same social networks were destroyed by the displacement and devastation of Katrina, making folks even more vulnerable in the future. Families living close to one another rely on neighbors for child care, personal safety, and even economic help. That was wiped away with the floodwaters.

What does this ongoing tragedy mean for funders, a key issue raised in my visit? How do non-governmental outsiders who can deploy relatively large resources help? The first lesson we learned was: forget everything you know about grantmaking. This is an unprecedented domestic disaster. Stop

asking for grant proposals from people and organizations that still don't have computers. Drop your assumptions and even political agendas, and increase your flexibility as a funder. One out-of-state foundation program officer described his new paperwork process as a phone call with Gulf Coast grantees; he took notes and filled out grant forms as they spoke. His foundation's existing relationships with activists and orga-

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nizations allowed him to vouch for any new relationships and activities.

And support grassroots organizing and advocacy. Already direly underfunded by large foundations, this work is key for local people to lead their city's recovery and vision their city's future. It is key for defending the health and rights of local laborers working to clean up and rebuild the city. It is key to



shaping the rebuilding in a way that works for all people. And it is key to slowing down the profiteering which continues even a year after the hurricanes hit; why are we targeting the corporations for a "recovery" they are in no need of.

Taxi drivers, organizers, funders, and shopkeepers all appreciated the interest we outsiders showed, and our determination to bear witness and have what we saw shape what it is we do. They hoped we would encourage others to come visit. For their sake and all of our sakes, we need a national dialogue about what the Gulf Coast experience means to us as a nation, about how our government is failing us, and about how we perpetuate structural racism and poverty, and the cost of this to America.

Wendy Volkmann, PRA Board Chair

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PRA Eyes Pre-Election Tactics of the Christian Right

PRA's research team was on high alert this fall tracking election-related shifts in the Christian Right's message and briefing journalists on the history of their movement. Researchers paid particular attention to a major pre-election pep rally held in Washington, DC September 22-24 held by a new coalition led by the lobbying group FRC Action.

The Family Research Council and its offspring FRC Action have risen in importance since they replaced the Christian Coalition as the main mobilizing force of Christian conservatives at the polls and in lobbying Congress, making attendance of its Values Voters Summit essential to PRA's ongoing research. Not surprisingly, opposition to gay marriage and banning access to abortion topped their list of political concerns. But to this "internal threat," the Christian Right also added the "external threat" of Islamic terrorism, which was the Republican talking point of the election season.

Within weeks, researchers Chip Berlet and Pam Chamberlain released a report on the new tactics, *Running Against Sodom and Osama: The Christian Right, Values Voters, and the Culture War in 2006*. And in the first of an ongoing collaboration with the National Radio Project, *Public Eye* editor Abby Scher produced a half-hour mini-documentary on the summit and the Christian Right's changing message for the nationally syndicated show *Making Contact*, broadcast a week before the election.

But the staff did not wait to share its insights, blogging about the conference on RightWatch.com, published by People for the American Way, and Talk2Action, the group blog created by observers of the Christian Right. Scher's article on the summit,

posted on *InTheseTimes.com*, won her radio interviews. Berlet gave interviews to a wide range of media, including the BBC, independent media, including American Prospect television and Democracy Now!. And, together with the advocacy group Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, researchers exposed a scandal that brewed during a Saturday session.

That was a training on "Getting Church Voters to the Polls," led by Connie Marshner, director of Morton Blackwell's Leadership Institute's International program. The Leadership Institute proclaims itself "the premier training ground for tomorrow's conservative leaders. Conservative leaders, organizations and activists rely on the Institute for the preparation they require for success." But Connie told the participants to call fellow congregants using their church directories for phone numbers, disguise their voices, and say they are from polling companies. Then, she suggested, they should guide them in a series of questions that will get preferred voters to the polls.

PRA Director Katherine Ragsdale and Chip Berlet both asked Marshner about the ethics of such a strategy, backed up by Rob Boston of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, who also attended the session. The room reportedly became tense, and Ms. Marshner's questionable advice made the *New York Times* coverage of the conference. Family Research Council director Tony Perkins was forced to disclaim the training, but the question remains of how a network sincerely promoting their view of family values could promote such an unethical strategy.

Abby Scher, The Public Eye Senior Editor

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PRA welcomes Tarso Luís Ramos as PRA's new Research Director



Tarso Luís Ramos joined PRA in May as our new director of research. A longtime PRA colleague and collaborator, Tarso has been a researcher and writer on right-wing groups since 1991. As director of the Wise Use Public Exposure Project at the Western States Center, he led efforts to counteract anti-union and environmental campaigns in the western United States.

Tarso's writings on the Wise Use and property rights movements have appeared in various publications, including the book *Eyes Right!*, published by Political Research Associates. From 2000-2005 he directed Western States Center's racial justice program, which resists racist public policy initiatives and supports the base-building work of progressive people of color-led organizations. His interests include immigration and the rise of "colorblind" ideology. Tarso spent 2005 and the first half of 2006 living and working with social movements in Brazil, including the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and the Black Movement (Movimento Negro). Look for his work on these and other topics in future PRA publications, including *The Public Eye*. PRA is excited about Tarso's diverse intellectual background and experience producing research to support progressive grassroots organizing.

Continued from page 1

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

speed and will be hard for anyone to slow, much less stop — even if they have the will to try.

We don't know the concrete results of the realignment of Party power in Congress. Here's what we do know. Progressives, anyone dedicated to working for justice, freedom, and peace through democratic processes, know that there is no single Party, structure, or alliance that we can depend on to solve our problems for us. We know the importance of raising our voices — *all of our voices* — to decry oppression and demand justice and equity and our fair places at the banquet that life in this country still is. PRA is committed to adding our voices, encouraging yours, and publishing as many as we can.

May the struggle continue and may we find life and hope and joy within it.

Katherine Ragsdale

PRAccess

Editor

Tom Louie

PRAccess is a publication of:

Political Research Associates
1310 Broadway, Suite 201
Somerville MA 02144

Phone: 617-666-5300

Fax: 617-666-6622

pra@publiceye.org

www.publiceye.org

Staff

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Pam Chamberlain, *Senior Researcher*

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PRA Report Documents Growing Threat at UN

In early December, PRA is slated to release "UNdoing Reproductive Freedom: Christian Right NGOs Target the United Nations" written by researcher Pam Chamberlain.

The report documents the growing threat to international policies supporting women's reproductive rights from Christian Right NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations. Their power has grown with the election of an anti-choice president in the United States in 2000 and his appointment of John Bolton as UN Ambassador in 2005.

Concerned Women for America, American Life League and Focus on the Family: these groups have attempted to shift the focus of some UN supported public health programs in developing countries to abstinence from contraception, and limiting access to abortions.

Available in hard copy for \$7.95 plus shipping and handling, 617.666.5300, or downloadable from www.publiceye.org in the first week of December

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As part of our Anniversary Celebration, we have organized special events in New York, Washington, D.C., Denver, Chicago, the Bay Area, and an upcoming Boston party. Here are samples of what our supporters are saying about PRA:

“If and when a history is written about the resurgence of progressive movements in the United States in the 21st century, PRA will occupy a central role”

—DEEPAK BHARGAVA, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CENTER FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE AT THE D.C. CELEBRATION

“If you care about civil liberties, you should be supporting Political Research Associates.”

—UDI OFER, DIRECTOR OF NYCLU’S BILL OF RIGHTS DEFENSE CAMPAIGN AT THE NEW YORK CELEBRATION

Please join us in our celebration by supporting PRA with a special 25th Anniversary contribution. Your donation will help ensure that activists, educators, scholars, journalists, and the public continue to have access to our thoughtful, accurate, and incisive research to support progressive movements in resistance to the Right.