

# How Christian Right Got on Boards

■ **Government:** There is plenty of blame to go around, and if the fundamentalists don't want to be accused of running stealth campaigns, they should act differently.

By **CLAUDIA PEARCE**

Imagine a candidate for your community's school board who has never attended a board meeting, who admits knowing little about the school district, who hopes to teach her children at home when they're of school age, and who refuses to participate in public forums for the candidates.

Further imagine that this candidate belongs to a well-financed coalition of fundamentalist Christians that plans to take over school boards and public offices in communities throughout San Diego County in order to further its agenda of banning abortions, fighting gun-control laws and putting its brand of Christian values into school classrooms.

The coalition wants classroom changes that include teaching the biblical account of creation as a scientific theory, bringing prayer back to the schools, teaching that homosexuality is evil, discarding multicultural programs and eliminating programs that advocate any strategies besides abstinence for dealing with birth control, family planning and AIDS prevention.

Imagine this candidate defeating an incumbent who has raised two children in your community schools, who has volunteered for 19 years in the district, who is widely praised by educators, PTA members and her colleagues on the school board.

This event is not imaginary. It happened in La Mesa in 1990.

Cheryl M. Jones, a former Christian school teacher and now a full-time mother of two, said she was as astonished as everyone else when she won a place on the La Mesa-Spring Valley Unified School board in 1990, beating the incumbent, Carroll A. Albright, by more than 6,000 votes.

"I believe God wanted me to run," Jones said. "But I was shocked that He wanted me to win."

Jones personified the 50 candidates from the religious right who won positions on school boards and other public offices in San Diego County's 1990 elections. They became a visible force in the county overnight.

According to surprised observers, three factors led to the religious right's success: anti-incumbent fever, voter ignorance and "stealth tactics."

Hawley E. Ridenour, president of the La Mesa-Spring Valley school board, said many voted against incumbents even when they knew nothing about the challenging candidates. This gave the edge to the religious right's candidates, few of whom were incumbents.

Although Ridenour decried ignorant voting, he and others were positively enraged at what they described as the religious right's stealth tactics.

If the public had known the views of these people, Ridenour said, they never would have been elected.

Ridenour and Albright say the religious right purposely hid their campaigns from all but fundamentalist voters, on advice from the anti-abortion groups and gun lobbies who financed the campaign.

But Jones gets angry when people accuse her of having a hidden agenda. Although her campaign consisted of speaking to one church group (at its invitation) and giving short interviews to the local press that did not mention



most of the controversial views she holds, she insists she was not hiding anything.

She said she would have answered questions on specific issues if anyone had bothered asking. But no one did.

Jones said she didn't accept invitations to speak at the PTA-sponsored public forums because she does not agree with the PTA's political agenda.

Jones acknowledges that she hardly campaigned. She left it up to anti-abortion groups that distributed leaflets in 500 church parking lots with lists of approved candidates, held voter registration drives at churches, and canvassed by phone from church directories.

Members of the religious right are planning similar tactics for the November elections. If they repeat their 1990 successes, they will achieve majorities on many of San Diego County's school boards, enabling them to enact their agendas.

This would be a disaster. We need school board members who support community values and can serve all students, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Jones believes the religious right fulfills these requirements. She believes fundamentalist views represent the majority of the voters.

Some of her views seem harmless. If Jones wants to institute a moment of silence in school so kids can pray or twiddle their thumbs, it's no big deal. A silent moment might be beneficial to children who are having a rough day. After all, it's only a minute.

But many of Jones' views show her inability to empathize with the diverse needs of the community represents. She obviously cares deeply for her own children. But what about non-fundamentalist children? What about teen-agers who are struggling to come to terms with their sexuality?

Studies show nearly a third of gay teen-agers attempt suicide at least once, because they feel overwhelmed by society's bigotry against homosexuality and find it impossible to become straight. Wouldn't teaching that

homosexuality is evil drive more of these teen-agers to self-hate and suicide?

Jones responds that her views are based on Scripture, and if they don't sit well with gay teen-agers, it's too bad.

Jones' pro-gun beliefs are also alarming. She said she and other Operation Rescue members experienced police brutality when they were trying to blockade abortion clinics.

She thinks people need to bear arms to protect themselves from an overly aggressive government.

"Our constitutional right to bear arms wasn't for shooting animals, it was for shooting people," she said.

View such as these were not brought out in the 1990 fundamentalist campaigns.

Even if their 1990 campaign was not purposely hidden, there is no question that many voters, including teachers and school boards, had never heard of the fundamentalist candidates who won and had no idea what their specific beliefs were.

The media must share the blame. Stories about school board candidates were a paragraph or two long. Candidates from the religious right usually said they were in favor of "honesty, responsibility, courtesy and family values." Who isn't?

The press needs to dig deeper so that specific agendas come out before the election instead of afterward.

Registered voters must also share blame. Many voted in ignorance or didn't bother to vote at all.

But fundamentalist candidates are not blameless. They could certainly make more of an effort to let their views be known.

If this year's candidates want to avoid charges of running stealth campaigns, they should show up at the public forums and stay in town during the last stages of the elections. If they truly represent the majority, they will have no problem winning when their opinions become known.

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