PROMO: A History of LGBTQ+ Privacy Rights in Missouri

PROMO is an advocacy nonprofit that lobbies for LGBTQ+ civil rights in Missouri. Founded in 1986, they organized in response to "Bowers v. Hardwick," a case that affected the right of gay and lesbian people to engage in private, consensual sex on a national scale.

PROMO has undergone many changes to their name over the years, moving from PACE to PREP to PROMO. The name was important to get right, as it represented a wide community of people coming together to fight against discriminatory laws in Missouri. They needed to create a safe space for people to discuss their fears of retaliation while also providing the education and structure for active change.

PREP: "Public About Privacy"

In 1986, keeping the brand new PACE afloat proved challenging, but the founders were determined to fight for the LGBTQ+ community. They would undergo many changes to their name over the years as they developed their voice.

When PACE became PREP in 1987, it was decided that a logo should be drawn up for a media campaign. In order to advocate for privacy rights, PREP needed to create a public image for themselves. They developed a broad statement of purpose that was narrowed down to a few sentences by their 10th anniversary in 1996.

In 2001, PREP became PROMO. Their tagline beneath the logo was "for the Personal Rights of Missourians," but the word "PROMO" was meant to stand alone as a "forward thinking" symbol. By 2006, the tagline was dropped.

HIV Activism

By November 1996, PREP had narrowed down their statement of purpose. While the focus of their work at that time was on privacy rights for LGBTQ+ people, they also advocated for people with HIV and AIDs, women's reproductive rights, immigration protection, custody rights, and disability rights.

In December 1987, PREP lobbied with the ACLU to block an AIDs bill that was prefiled in Missouri's General Assembly. Though it was the first bill they had ever worked to change, they were able to pass amendments that maintained privacy for those who had been diagnosed with AIDs and were receiving treatment.

In an undated pamphlet published by PREP titled "Examining Issues of Privacy Rights," PREP states that a loss of privacy can lead to loss of civil rights, such as "employment, housing, child custody, educational policy, health care, or immigration." This was certainly true for those

diagnosed with AIDs and HIV during the AIDs Crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, as there was much misinformation surrounding the disease.

“Low Risk” Activism

On January 9, 1990, PREP lobbied for the first time in Jefferson City against the Missouri Sexual Misconduct Law, which targeted the privacy rights of gay and lesbian communities. PREP presented legislators with over 12,000 signatures and 80 endorsements against the law. Senator John Bass agreed to sponsor the Repeal Bill in the Senate after 16 PREP members crowded into his office.

During the 1990s, PREP recognized that advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in Missouri placed people in a situation where they may lose their job or housing. To attract more members for lobbying efforts, they presented “Low Risk, No Risk” methods for activism. In 1993, Fight the Right House Meetings were developed by PREP as a way for members to easily combat misinformation spread by far right groups in a safe place.

By the early 2000s, PREP members had begun hosting house party benefits to raise money for lobbying. PREP rallied itself around the community by hosting a variety of benefit parties. Each year, they would host a prom, an art show, a poetry reading, and a pool party, along with many more opportunities to meet people supportive of LGBTQ+ communities in the St. Louis area while supporting PREP’s efforts.

Building an Active Community

Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, PREP/PROMO shared information with members through overflowing monthly newsletters, entitled Monthly Updates or PREP Perspective. An additional newsletter called “OUTWrite” kept everyone updated twice a month.

PROMO’s flyers have traditionally been meant to excite people into action, as can be seen here. Amendment 2, passed in Colorado in 1992, banned anti-discrimination practices for gay and lesbian populations. During this decade, PREP was concerned with the local Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which allowed discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities under religious freedoms.

A notable example of 1990s informational advocacy are these business card sized packets that could be kept in a wallet. This one functions both as a guide for who to contact during mail campaigns and how to get in contact with PREP.

Safe Spaces

PROMO's first home was in the World Community Center, originally located at 438 N. Skinker in St. Louis. Given the nickname "The Center," the old brick house functioned as a home for a large number of other activist organizations, all of which shared one kitchen. PREP relied on many of these organizations as it grew, both for social support and for office supplies.

Trinity Episcopal Church is a historic St. Louis church in the Central West End neighborhood of St. Louis. It was a safe place for St. Louis AIDs patients in the 1980s and continued to support LGBTQ+ activists, such as PREP, into the 1990s. This church hosted many meetings, such as the ACTION Caucus of 1992.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, now the National LGBTQ Task Force, helped PREP to revise their statement of purpose in 1987. In 2004, they held their "Creating Change" conference in St. Louis and an ad for PROMO was placed in the conference booklet. Two years later, at the 2006 conference, two interns from PROMO were given awards for their work promoting LGBTQ+ rights.

Youth Activism

On November 19, 1994, PREP, the Center, and Washington University in St. Louis hosted a "gay positive" forum where panels discussed homophobia in schools. One of the panelists was Dr. Franklin McCallie, the principal of Kirkwood High School. In an article from The Riverfront Times, McCallie responds to why the high school has not yet created a "safe space" for LGBTQ+ students: "Homophobia."

In September 2001, PREP reported in their newsletter that they had lobbied in Jefferson City for the Missouri Nondiscrimination Act, which would stop people in Missouri from refusing jobs and housing based on sexual orientation. Twelve high schoolers from Kirkwood High School had gone with them. By 2002, KHS had founded its Gay Straight Alliance, a safe space for young LGBTQ+ students.

PREP had previously worked with the St. Louis chapter of P-FLAG, or the "Federation of Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays." In 1990, P-FLAG was just as concerned with the language of the Hate Crimes Statistics Bill. It did not include protection for hate crimes based on sexual orientation.