

## GO WEST



JON W. DAVIDSON

**WHILE LAMBDA LEGAL HAS** always had a national focus, a national board, and a national network of volunteers and supporters, 20 years ago the organization opened its first regional office in Los Angeles. In space offered by the law firm of Hedges & Caldwell (now Caldwell Leslie & Proctor), it started with just one attorney, Mary Newcombe, and one legal assistant, Nina Brown. In short order, the West Coast Regional Office (WRO) was in full throttle, providing counseling to hundreds of callers, particularly servicemembers, and taking on staunch resistance in the courts. “The district court dismissed our case challenging the military’s discharge of Capt. Dusty Pruitt,” Newcombe recalls. “Although it took three years, we ultimately convinced the Ninth Circuit that we were entitled to have a factual hearing on the basis for the military’s antigay policy.” This case paved the way for Lambda Legal’s victory in Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer’s military discharge

case some years later—a groundbreaking victory achieved by the WRO team.

The office has now grown to a full-time staff of 14. Its success inspired the establishment of more regional Lambda Legal offices in Chicago, Atlanta and Dallas. Under the leadership of Senior Counsel Jenny Pizer and Regional

### **NAME THE ISSUE, AND LAMBDA LEGAL’S WESTERN REGIONAL OFFICE HAS BEEN THERE. ON ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY, WE’RE BEAMING.**

Director Loren Javier, the WRO is now a powerhouse for LGBT and HIV civil rights advocacy and education throughout the 11 states in the West.

Thanks to the work of the WRO in collaboration with our sister legal organizations, more than 18,000 same-sex couples married legally in California and remain legally married in the state. WRO attorneys also drafted California’s domestic partnership law, successfully defended it against legal challenges, and helped those in Oregon, Washington and Nevada who drew on it in passing their states’ domestic partnership laws. The WRO also won rulings that those who erroneously believed they had registered with the state as domestic partners are entitled to its protections and that California businesses must treat registered domestic partners identically to spouses.

A hallmark of the WRO has been its tenacity. The WRO has returned to Hawai’i (where the

modern fight for relationship rights for same-sex couples began, with Lambda Legal’s *Baehr v. Lewin* case) to seek equal rights and benefits for same-sex couples under state law. The WRO is also at work again in Arizona, seeking to preserve domestic partner benefits for the state’s lesbian and gay employees.

Another hallmark has been the breadth of the WRO’s docket. Not only have our attorneys fought for marriage equality and other relationship protections, health care fairness and the rights of LGBT servicemembers—they have defended the validity of second-parent adoptions, reunited parents and children cruelly separated by antigay relatives, and won benefits for partners of 9/11 victims. The WRO has vindicated the rights of students to form gay-straight alliances and to be free from censorship and harassment at school. It also has helped seniors keep their homes or other family assets after the death of their partners.

The WRO has fought workplace discrimination against lesbian teachers, reporters and servicemembers and gay police officers, insurance agents and paramedics. It has challenged discrimination based on gender identity or expression in employment, public accommodations and custody determinations. It has blocked and overturned antigay initiatives. It has fought for people with HIV against invasions of privacy and unfair insurance practices. It has championed the rights of gay rights protestors subjected to police misconduct and it has won asylum for those persecuted in their home countries for being part of the LGBT community.

You name the issue, you name the community, and Lambda Legal’s Western Regional Office has been there. It’s a lot to be proud of. And, on this anniversary, we’re beaming.

*Jon W. Davidson*