

# The Giant Sucking Sound

by Ken Ray

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I dialed the number in early March. I know my State Representative's home number by heart now. "Ken," he says on the other end, "What can I do for you?"

"I need you to make a speech for us on the floor when our vote comes up on the helmet bill."

"No problem," he says, "anything you need."

When I joined ABATE in 1989, I did it because I had read about ABATE in *Easyriders* magazine. I knew that they were politically active and I wanted to join a group to help fight the helmet law that had been installed the year before in Oregon. It never occurred to me that I would end up doing the lobbying and legislative work. As time went on I became more active as a chapter officer and a state officer for ABATE of Oregon. And, as many of us have found out, being an officer carries a responsibility to provide an example.

When I was in college I was politically active. I even went so far as to be a delegate to the Democratic state convention in Oklahoma where I lived at the time. I was a nineteen year old longhaired kid with a "west-coast accent," but the Oklahoma farmers in my precinct, county and district let me assume a leadership position. I learned that if you know the system, you will become a leader to others.

BikePAC of Oregon sponsored what was called "Bikers Days" at the state capitol in the 1995 legislative session. I had been to the capitol before, but never tried to have any direct contact with legislators. I was amazed! Not only were the legislators willing to listen to me, they actually appreciated me bringing my point of view to them. The image that I had formed of this unreachable clique of politicians was completely shattered. The only reason they were unreachable was because I had never tried to reach them. Armed with this discovery, I spent many days at the capital working to get our helmet law through the legislature.

One of the most euphoric feelings I have ever felt was in April of 1995 when our helmet bill passed the House with a vote of 52-7. This must be how racers feel when they win the Indy 500 after trying for so many years. Although our bill died in the Senate, I was hooked on this taste of victory.

In 1996 our region was the host of the Best of the West conference sponsored by the Motorcycle Riders Foundation. One of the worthy classes I attended was by Wayne Curtain on "Campaign Involvement." He talked about how he became politically active and how to get there yourself. This, combined with a couple of classes given at Meeting of the Minds, was all I needed. I was going to become involved.

Like most of us I did not have the money to make a significant contribution to a campaign, but I was willing to invest the time. I started out in October. My state representative, Chuck Carpenter, had been very supportive last legislative session. I committed to do what I could to make sure he represented me next session. I first put up about a hundred yard signs around the district. I would put them in front of the opponents' signs but without touching their signs. Chuck (my State representative) said that I must have done a good job since he got complaints from the other guy.

I then spent three weekends handing out pamphlets. It might have been easier to just stay home and watch football, but I had decided to do what was necessary. It was easy! I just rang the doorbell and when people answered the door I asked them to vote for Chuck Carpenter. It was also fun. After we were done for the day we all went to the pub and had a few beers and hung out. In other words these political types were just like me.

Finally, the night before election day, Chuck and I went out and put up another 150 of his yard signs around the district. We were out until about

2:00 in the morning and got a chance to visit. He said that doing this late night sign stuff was above the call of duty and he appreciated it. He said that whatever I needed during the legislative session, he would be behind. He already knew that helmet law amendment would be one of my key items and was a supporter all the way. I should mention that he did win. It was also fun to be one of the people at his election eve party and meet some of the hightbrows from the political scene. I was the only one there with a Harley shirt on, that was for sure!

I don't know who thought up the idea, but in Oregon we have a "Legislator's Buddy" system. (Adapted from *United Bikers of Maine* — ed.) One of us in ABATE or BikePAC picks a legislator and becomes their buddy. In other words, the motorcycling activist becomes the voice for motorcyclists to this legislator. Usually we pick our own legislator, but this is not required. Ideally what happens is that if a motorcycle related bill comes across their desk, the legislator will call us to ask how we feel about it. But it is still important to stay up on bills as well because a lot can happen in a session. I can say with no reservations that this Legislator's Buddy system works. The primary purpose of the Legislator's Buddy is to be the voice of motorcyclists for their district.

The other purpose of the Legislator's Buddy system is, to bring motorcycling issues up first to my legislator and counteract the smear campaigns run by the groups against us. Just having someone who can give the biker's side of things to legislators and staff is invaluable. They'll say things like "Dr. so-and-so said that deaths will triple if we repeal the helmet law. What do you say to that?" Then I get a chance to refute the theories put forth by the well-meaning social engineer.

It takes a bit of work. You have to study and know your facts. Sometimes you get lucky and have a legislator who is philosophically aligned with us. Even then you might have to bring out your facts because they may get bombarded with negative testimony, and you will have to straighten them out again.

Another benefit from campaign volunteering is access. When you are personally known to the legislator, they are more likely to talk to you. I

use my access for many issues I am interested in. I don't have to be a "single-issue" person. In fact I have found that their respect for you increases if you are interested in more than one issue. Being a Legislator's Buddy also increases your access. If you have met with a legislator several times, you become familiar to them. This is how lobbyists build power. Sometimes a message has to be repeated to be heard. It is said that it can take as many as five times repeating a concept for it to sink in, so persistence is the key. But your power as a legislative buddy can be greater than a lobbyist. A lobbyist is usually trying to make a living "selling" their ideas. An MRO Legislator's Buddy is usually a volunteer. This can often carry a lot of weight with a "Representative of the People." And if it doesn't help with the legislator, it may carry a lot of weight with the appoint-ment secretary or assistant.

Now if all of this sounds as fun as summer school, take heart. It is a lot of fun. I'm sure that different people get different things from Legislator's Buddy work. But I get excited over the fact that I am working to take control of my citizenship. I get to know the people who represent us. And it is fun to amaze my neighbors at the town hall meetings when this biker just walks right up and starts talking with our Senators and Representatives.

I have learned many lessons from these experiences. I learned primarily that our system of government works! I learned that the world is run by those who bother to show up to run it. I learned that the more we are involved, the better the system works. Mainly, though, I learned that one person can make a difference.

I know that for much of our lives we have been taught that one person can't make a difference. These teachings were not overt, they were messages from many sources. The bureaucratic government will give a message, "You have no rights unless we give them to you." The media will imply that "you won't know what to think unless we tell you what is important." The medical profession may say, "You won't live unless we tell you how to live." All of these messages are ones that keep us in chains only if we let them. It takes a strong mind and will to break free and

take part. I know the feeling of cynicism. I have felt it too. But I found out that I could make a difference. For so many of us political involvement is not something we do. Not because it is hard to do; but because it is easy not to do.

One of the finest ways to get involved and make a difference is through the political parties. I have mainly experience in the way Oregon does their process, but it is my understanding that most states operate along similar guidelines. The easiest way to get started is by becoming a precinct committee person (PCP) for your party. A class I attended at Meeting of the Minds once pointed out that all politics is local. The basic unit in the electoral process is in the precinct. A PCP is the representative for a political party in that precinct.

A precinct committee person is usually an elected official. However, I first became one by volunteering and was appointed to fill a vacancy. There are usually more positions than volunteers to fill them. This gives us an excellent opportunity to get some of our people in to the party. We need people in both parties! Note I have ignored the fact that there is an option to become an independent. I respect the people who want to be registered independent, but I don't believe you can be a political activist and be a registered independent. Being an independent is throwing your vote away in the primaries. In Oregon, anyway, an independent doesn't usually get to vote for candidates in the primaries. And that is where 75% of the important races are won or lost.

Once you have volunteered, you go through an approval process. I do not agree 100% with some items on my party's platform. I don't have to. The county chair usually talks to you on the phone and questions you a little. They send you a letter asking you to sign on to the platform. Then you're in. The meetings happen once in a while and they are not usually as organized as bikers are! One thing I can say is that all organizations, whether biker or Republicans or Democrats, are all about the same. Out of 240 PCPs only about 25 showed up at the first meeting I attended! It's just like ABATE; it's just like politics; it's just like life: the world is run by those who bother to show up to run it.

PCPs also have the opportunity to be del-

egates, and to set the platform for their party in the state. It also can increase your prestige when dealing with the politicians. In August of 1998, I managed to change my party's platform. With some help from another BikePAC member and friendly legislators, the Republican party in Oregon is now against mandatory helmet laws. All Republican legislators are supposed to work to fulfill the platform. This means that now they are supposed to work to eliminate the helmet law in Oregon. Will this make a difference? I don't know. But it is another tool we can use to advance the Motorcyclists' Rights agenda.

Because of being at the meetings, I am able to visit with some of our local area legislators. Because they are impressed by the fact that I have become active in party politics, my words carry a little more weight when I am speaking. There is a little more respect. This can go a long way to changing a legislator's position. I gained a lot of useful information that we would not have had otherwise. But now what to do with this information? Well that is the next step.

First you have to share that information with all other freedom-fighters that it may concern. The purpose is not to play political party games, it is to advance our agenda. So I share the info with everybody whether they are in my party or not. You have to have a system to collect that information. And you have to use that information to your advantage in elections.

It would be nice if all we had to do is take this information and use it to vote. But that is not enough. There is more we all have to do if we want to win our battles.

You have to make your vote count like 10,000 other votes. Here is how you do that: Become a volunteer. So you are already an ABATE volunteer? That's great, this is not much different. Can you talk on the phone? Lick envelopes? Stamp envelopes? Walk around and hand out flyers? Congratulations! You are a fully qualified campaign volunteer. People think that money is what wins campaigns. NOT TRUE! What money can buy is what wins elections. 20 hours of enthusiastic volunteer work on a campaign is something that the candidate can't buy for \$5000! So do it.

Even if your candidate does not win, you still

can gain. First of all you gain respect from other campaign volunteers. Second, your candidates' opponent will have respect for you as an adversary. Although it is good to have friends, it is better to have respect from a politician. Even if the other side wins, they may think twice about getting on your bad side again.

Victory comes through hard work in the most effective areas. Just participation by itself is not enough to ensure victory. If we are to become a true political force, we have to become political. It is simply not enough to just cast your vote and say "I did my part."

*The title of this article has become a catch phrase here in Oregon; it refers to the point in an individual's life when the light comes on; when they're hit by that sudden passion, or vision, that turns them into activists and leaders. Ken Ray is one of those people who never heard "the giant sucking sound" that got him.*  
— ed.