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Almost Home



*America's Love-Hate Relationship
with Community*

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*To my godparents Jakie and Frank
and to my godson Aaron*

Pacific had produced was being aired nationally on PBS, as well as in France and Japan.

There was one internal casualty of the struggle to promote AIDS education: Michael Eriksen was abruptly fired by Ralph Alexander immediately after the AIDS conference. "I no longer have any need for you," the medical director had told Eriksen. There had been continuing disagreements between the two men. For his part, Alexander says, "Some programs he was supposed to run didn't work out."

The loss of Eriksen was deeply troubling to his colleagues, who had relied on his expertise. But his loss at this point was sustainable. There was product and momentum. With the video in hand and the AIDS Education Task Force functioning, the internal education efforts began to pick up. Success led to success. Responding to a request from the union that Pacific require AIDS education, Operations vice president Lee Cox sent a letter to all supervisors, not insisting but recommending that they show the video as part of an AIDS education session.

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Producing the video pushed Pacific into the public arena on AIDS. What came next was even further removed from corporate tradition and even more dangerous: taking a public position on a statewide AIDS ballot proposition.

An organization led by political extremist Lyndon LaRouche, whose motto, "Spread panic, not AIDS,"

became the rally cry for a cause, had garnered enough signatures to force a statewide vote on a measure—Proposition 64—that, if passed by the electorate in the November 1986 election, would turn panic into law. The implications of the badly drafted measure were that thousands of workers who had AIDS could be fired, hundreds of students who carried the virus could be removed from school and college; moreover, people with AIDS could be quarantined. It appealed to people's emotions and played on their fears, yet had the simple allure of seeming to offer voters their chance to do something to protect themselves from the dread AIDS virus.

Most of California's chief public figures—politicians, church leaders, educators—opposed the measure. Steve Coulter wanted Pacific to add its voice to the opposition. Yet the huge number of signatures—it took nearly half a million to qualify the measure for the ballot—testified to the proposition's popular appeal. And some of the state's leading political conservatives voiced their strong support for the measure.

Like most companies, Pacific seldom took a stand on any ballot measure that did not directly affect its business. This political principle gave the company an easy and clear dividing line and protected it from needlessly making enemies over extraneous issues. Instead, Pacific preferred to exert its political influence through quieter relationships between lobbyists and lawmakers in the state capital. On the ballot measure, Pacific's lobbyists in Sacramento adamantly urged the company to remain mute.

For months, the debate over Proposition 64 continued inside Pacific. The conservatives from government

relations and human resources insisted that opposing the measure would only earn Pacific powerful political enemies. The corporate communications activists countered that silence would put Pacific in league with those who proposed quarantining AIDS carriers and would also offend key external stakeholders, who might then "find additional avenues to criticize the company."

The stalemate was finally broken at the officers' level. Art Latno and Gary McBee, the two top external-affairs officials, determined that the company would publicly urge the defeat of Proposition 64. McBee, who had come to know the human cost of AIDS when a member of his staff died from the disease, became a strong voice for taking on LaRouche. "Given our internal position on AIDS," he says, "it would have been unconscionable for us not to oppose Prop. 64." The officers authorized a \$5,000 corporate contribution to the campaign, the biggest single donation from any California business.

The stance was different—a decided shift from business as usual. Yet it reflected a fact of life about the shifting relationship between business and politics. In California—and increasingly across the country—voters were deciding more and more significant policy questions, rather than leaving matters to the elected officials. If a company wanted to have a say on those matters, it had to go public.

In the November 1986 election, California's voters resoundingly rejected Proposition 64. Although some Sacramento lawmakers grumbled at Pacific's lobbyists, the feared retaliation never occurred; and when LaRouche put the same measure on the ballot in June

1988, Pacific officials opposed it without thinking twice.

But the real test of how far Pacific had come on the issue took place in November 1988, when Proposition 102 hit the ballot. This was no kooky extremist's handiwork but a proposal authored by GOP congressman William Dannemeyer that would essentially abolish anonymous AIDS testing. While leading public health figures opposed the measure, fearing that its reporting requirements would drive those at risk for AIDS underground, the proposition did not threaten quarantining. It had modest support among doctors—and, more important, an endorsement from the popular Republican governor, George Deukmejian. Pacific risked political wrath—facing down a barrage of appeals from Dannemeyer—by opposing the measure. McBee again championed that position. The proposition was defeated.

Now there were other constituencies enlisting Pacific in their efforts to combat AIDS. Prompted by Lynn Jiménez in corporate communications, Pacific spent nearly \$100,000 in 1987 to promote a Spanish-language AIDS *videonovela*. This venture too had its risks, for the story line dealt candidly with homosexuality and drug use, two topics anathema to the conservative Hispanic community. But HACER, the coalition of Hispanic groups, urged the company to go ahead—despite the opposition of religious and political leaders in the community. The *videonovela* was yet another success story, with local TV stations reporting larger than usual audiences. Pacific Telesis Foundation proceeded with its plans to underwrite a dubbed-into-English version.