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Nikki Love

Clean, transparent politics is the cause of Common Cause Hawaii

By Vicki Viotti

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 18, 2011

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Nikki Love has studied up a lot on this stuff — her university creds so far include a B.A. in political science from Stanford and an M.A. in public policy from

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Georgetown.

But despite that preparation, and the fact that she spends so much time during this season at the state Capitol, some things that pop out of that square building can still surprise her. The 32-year-old executive director of Common Cause Hawaii was not expecting a bill that sought stricter ethics rules to morph into a draft allowing lawmakers to accept free fundraiser tickets from nonprofits.

"We didn't even see that coming," she said.

Love's not complaining, of course: The national mission of Common Cause, a nonprofit watchdog organization, includes advocating for more ethical and transparent government. Other issues pursued by the 36 state chapters involve money in politics, elections and the impact of media on the public interest.

The Hawaii chapter originated more than 30 years ago but went inactive for a time before it regrouped in 2009. Love acknowledged the ongoing challenges of fundraising in a down economy and recruiting younger members.

Despite the frequent hurdles that good-government warriors confront, Love is undeterred, even encouraged.

"One of the things interesting to see is that people can make a difference when it's something like in the last couple of weeks, the ethics bill," she said. "A lot of people spoke up. ... That's nice to see. It does matter. And when the media pays attention, that makes a huge difference."

QUESTION: Is there any change in the tone at the Legislature this year?

ANSWER: Definitely. We're really happy to see some good bills get hearings. It seems more so than in previous years — some of these voter-registration-related bills, and others.

Q: Is that to make it easier for people to register?

A: Yes. One of the ones still alive is on online voter registration. People can register entirely online, so they don't have to print out a form and put it in the mail; they can just do it online.

Q: Isn't that one way to get younger people involved?

A: Yeah, for sure. I think for a lot of people now, you do everything online. ... So how come government's lagging behind, in terms that you have to print everything in hard copy? ... I think you should make it as easy as possible.

Q: Other bills of interest?

A: Instant runoff voting is still moving. That's kind of an interesting one, sort of an alternative voting system to ensure that the person who wins the election actually gets the most votes. When the race has so many people running, someone could win with a very small percentage of the vote. The voters can actually rank their choices of the

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Columns



Incidental Lives
After a long, emotional ride, she says she has no regrets



candidates on the ballot. And then, instead of having to do a runoff, you can just simulate a runoff, using that ballot that the voter's already filled out, with their first, second, third choice. So then you don't have to have that cost of a second election; you can just run the runoff through the computer, essentially, or keep it tabulated. It's used in a bunch of places elsewhere. ... If nobody gets 50 percent ... that kicks in. The Council races are one example, even the Case-Hanabusa-Djou race last spring — the special election, that's one case where nobody got 50 percent. These kind of examples are popping up a lot, so that's why people are interested in it, why they see there might be a need for it.

Q: Has Common Cause taken up the bill making exemptions in rules on what gifts legislators can accept?

A: This new draft ... there's still a concern among citizen groups about what is the real rationale for having any exemption to the gifts law. I think the citizen activists are saying, if they want to support a nonprofit, or if they want to go learn about their activities, they can pay for the (fundraiser) ticket themselves and go see the nonprofit. It's really unfortunate; we really liked the original bill. It addressed so many issues that have been popping up. One of the provisions addressed events, things like a lot of these lobbying events that take place in the evening, which may be a reception or a dinner or something that these interest groups put on. One of the provisions of the bill strengthened the reporting of those events. We'd love to see something like that done so we can see more of what's going on.

Q: This is Sunshine Week, highlighting openness in government. Are there any bills dealing with this?

A: One that we've been watching — last year, too, and this year — is about the consumer complaints. At the beginning of session the bill would hide consumer complaints. It was basically all these steps it would have to go through before it could be made public, and it would make it really impossible to find out a consumer complaint until much later. We're really watching that. A lot of government agencies spoke out against it at the hearing: RICO (Regulated Industries Complaints Office), Office of Consumer Protection ...

Q: So they opposed that?

A: Yeah, actually, quite strongly opposed it. OIP (Office of Information Practices) also.

Q: Who was pushing that?

A: One of the groups that testified and a lot of the formatted testimony seemed to come from a lot of dentists. So I think one of those organizations is pushing for it. ... I think the bill has changed quite a bit, so I'll take a look at it.

Q: What is their concern?

A: One issue was the frivolous complaints; another one was maybe the length of time the complaints were left on the website. So maybe those little issues could be addressed. But that doesn't mean we have to get rid of all information about consumer complaints.

Q: On the transparency issue, and the whole thing about judicial appointees and the OIP, is this a concern?

A: Yeah, I think it's unfortunate that the recent precedent has been to release the names of the nominees and now the governor is not going to do this. That doesn't seem to be pointing in the right direction. At the same time, one of the things that came up, I think it was in December, was about the inaugural donors. We were very glad to see the governor did release the names of the inaugural donors. So we'll see in a few months. There's time for the administration to show more transparency.

Q: How does Common Cause view the governor's argument, that releasing the names would keep nominees from being considered because everyone will find out they didn't get selected?

A: No, not yet, not so far. We need to think about it and talk about it a little more. I don't know; I mean, it's tough. And with any government service, right? People are putting themselves out there in a public way.



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So some of that is kind of

expected, in any kind of public service position.

Q: Has the Citizens United case basically compromised attempts at voter-owned elections, such as the pilot project on the Big Island now? Do you have a position on that?

A: We definitely support fair elections, clean elections, publicly funded elections. Common Cause is a big supporter of that.

Q: Does it seem hopeless?

A: I don't think so. It's still a tool for reform. Since limits on these other kinds of campaign finance are really more difficult now, still having that other option, the clean election, it's still a good option. It's definitely harder, now that the quantity of money out there is going to be so big, and it's already getting bigger, and going to be bigger again in 2012. It's definitely frustrating.

Q: Does Common Cause agree with the position that it's also a free-speech issue?

A: Common Cause and a lot of the other groups that care about this are really frustrated with that notion that spending money in campaigns is somehow the same as speech. ... Some people were actually talking about a U.S. constitutional amendment to challenge that very idea, to say that money is not speech and you can restrict money when it comes to campaigns.

Maybe as time goes on and as we see the results of Citizens United in the next couple of elections, maybe it'll get to the point where the money is so huge, and it'll just get so disgusting to people, maybe that will motivate people toward some real change and some really big reform. Maybe that's coming. Hopefully we can fix it sooner than that and we don't have to resort to being completely disgusted with all of this stuff.

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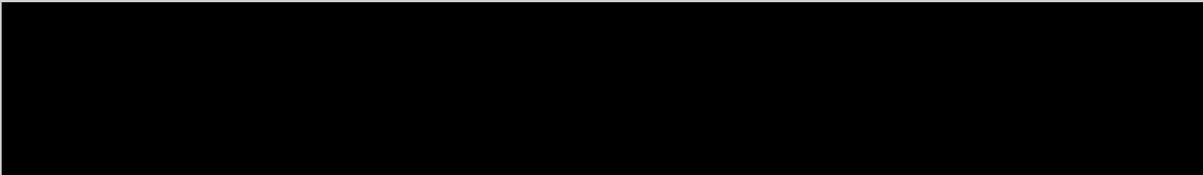
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