

Hooked on Politics

Savoring Victory, Prop. 227 Author Ponders New Efforts
Jenifer Warren - *The Los Angeles Times* - July 16, 1998

PALO ALTO—He bounded onto the political stage four years ago, a megabucks techno-nerd making a no-hope run for California governor. After he lost, most pundits figured Ron Unz would simply sulk a bit, then go away.

But this year the Silicon Valley entrepreneur proved them wrong—in a big way. With little more than a fax machine, two paid helpers and a chunk of his own fortune, Unz pushed through an initiative that essentially kills bilingual education in California and that endowed him with some serious political muscle on the statewide scene.

Now Unz is back home in Palo Alto, sifting through clutter from the Proposition 227 campaign. His software company awaits him, but Unz—a self-made multimillionaire—couldn't care less. Politics has gripped his soul, and he's not about to quit.

"It's very enjoyable," he mused recently, sitting near a shriveled potted fern on his backyard patio. "Studying the public policy, coming up with strategies for a winning campaign—it's really quite a lot of fun."

Unz is clearly savoring victory like a chess prodigy who just won his first big tournament, but he is not one to waste time studying moves from a past match. Already, the 36-year-old Republican is pushing his bilingual education gospel on new frontiers, both in Congress and among sympathizers who may sponsor copycat initiatives in several other states.

But he is more interested in remaining a marquee player in California, most likely through a second ballot measure. Among potential targets of a future Unz initiative: state tax policy, campaign finance law and tort reform. But he's coy about specifics.

Unz may also make another run for governor one day, though he disdains the monotony of the candidate's life: "Going to endless dinners to shake hands and line up contributions," he explained, "just isn't a very interesting way to spend one's time."

The initiative process is far more inviting for an introverted yet opinionated sort like Unz. Although no referendum is a sure thing, he has proved that a smart guy with good timing, determination, an appealing idea and a few bucks can make a lasting mark.

"Look at the \$40-million bonfire—Al Checchi—and then look at what Ron Unz did," said Sacramento political consultant Wayne Johnson. "He proved that he has the ability to conceptualize, organize, put something on the ballot and win."

Indeed, though controversial in many quarters, Proposition 227 turned out to be one of the most popular contested initiatives in state history,

passing with 61% of the vote. The measure survived its first legal challenge Wednesday, when a federal judge cleared the way for its implementation.

As a result, California's system of teaching children in their native languages will virtually end. Instead, students who are not fluent will be placed in intensive English classes for one year, then moved into regular courses.

Critics Lambaste Audacious Egghead

Critics say it's an outrage that someone like Unz—who is childless and had never set foot in a bilingual classroom until recently—could manage to level an educational system that had been in place for 30 years.

How dare this audacious egghead, this theoretical physicist with no background in education, presume that he knows what's best for the 1.4 million California schoolchildren with limited English skills—and then spend \$700,000 of his own money to get his way?

Cynics suspect there is an ulterior motive, that Unz used the initiative to raise his personal profile and build a launch pad for a future run for office.

“It seems to me he definitely does have an interest in continuing in the political arena,” said Silvina Rubinstein, executive director of the California Assn. for Bilingual Education. “I find it very disturbing that he is using the youth of California—experimenting with their lives—to further his career.”

Friends insist that the truth is far less sinister. They say Unz, who was educated at Harvard, Cambridge and Stanford and wields an IQ he once claimed to be 214, is a genuine policy wonk who wants to use his intellect and wealth for the public good—and believes it's his civic duty to do so.

“He's a nerdy guy who lives and breathes policy and politics,” said Robert Poole, president of the Reason Foundation, a think tank to which Unz contributes.

“He's a passionate intellectual, a missionary,” added conservative author and activist David Horowitz. “Even if this guy had no money, he'd be in a one-room apartment, spending all his time writing letters to the editor.”

It's true that Unz has all the markings of a monomaniacal political junkie.

Upon discovering *Commentary* magazine some time ago, he ordered 15 years of back issues and read them all.

He attends public policy seminars for fun, and, Poole says, “has a tendency to become very animated and monopolize the conversation.”

He also has a stubborn righteousness about him. “He never gives up in debates,” said Lorelei Kinder, who ran his campaign for governor.

“One time I finally had to say, ‘Ron, stop talking! I'm agreeing with you!’ “

His day-to-day life seems devoid of distractions from the contemplation of ideas. After spending 10 years building his company, Wall Street Analytics Inc. of Palo Alto, which writes financial management software, Unz recently placed the business in the hands of an associate and seems wholly uninterested in rejoining it.

A bachelor, he takes his meals at Burger King and has no hobbies, though he occasionally enjoys a walk through downtown Palo Alto, with a Neil Diamond tape playing over and over again on a stereo headset.

He drives a dusty Nissan Sentra and has yet to fully furnish his spacious Spanish-style home, purchased in 1992. Until recently, he owned only one suit, which he repeatedly patched throughout the Proposition 227 campaign—“until the holes simply became too big.”

“I do a lot of reading, to keep up on public policy,” said Unz, whose friendly face bears a square jaw and deep-set brown eyes. “I used to travel, but I don’t really have time anymore.”

For most of the last year, all of his waking hours were devoted to the relentless promotion of Proposition 227, which he dubbed “English for the Children” and others called simply the “Unz initiative.”

Unz says he went after bilingual education because California students were failing to learn English—and nobody, most notably the Legislature, was doing anything about it.

“If I hadn’t done something,” he said with typical, matter-of-fact hubris, “nothing would have been done.”

Grandson of Immigrants

A grandson of immigrants from Ukraine, Unz said he has been outraged for years by California’s “disastrous bilingual education system,” which he says deprives students of the English skills they need to succeed both socially and economically.

Bilingual education was a centerpiece of his 1994 gubernatorial campaign, and he has written numerous articles on the subject for conservative publications.

He has said that bilingual education, along with affirmative action and multiculturalism, are “ethnic, separatist” programs that could turn California into another Bosnia.

“I enjoyed the idea of doing something about bilingual education partly because in a society as multiethnic as the U.S., it’s a very important issue,” Unz said. “Another reason is that this sort of touchy issue is the kind of thing elected officials like to avoid. So it’s an area where I can have a greater impact.”

Unz has a personal link to the issue as well. His mother, who spoke only Yiddish in her family home, learned English at school—with no bilingual program to help her out.

To win over voters, Unz knew he had to package the initiative carefully and take pains to keep the campaign from turning racially divisive. Experts say one smart move was recruiting two co-chairpersons with credentials in the Latino community—teachers Jaime Escalante of “Stand and Deliver” fame and Gloria Matta Tuchman, who is running for state superintendent of public instruction.

Unz also kept tight control over the pro-Proposition 227 message. When an acquaintance suggested that he hire a professional consultant to manage the campaign, he interviewed a few and decided they didn’t know enough about bilingual education to handle the job.

So, “I hired myself as consultant,” Unz said, “and paid myself a salary of \$1. You know that color campaign brochure? I designed that. . . . I’m actually pretty good at this.”

Whatever Unz’s political talents, few could fault his stamina and industriousness.

Month after month, he zigged and zagged around the state, debating and defending Proposition 227 in forum after forum—about 200 in all, most of them hostile to his cause.

Unz became so absorbed by the campaign that he forgot to renew his driver’s license, an oversight that came to his attention only when he attempted to rent a car at Burbank Airport.

“We rescued him,” said Kinder, who also helped out on the initiative campaign. “He gets so focused that it had just slipped his mind.”

In the aftermath of Proposition 227’s victory, Unz is obviously enjoying the warmth of the limelight. Shortly after the election, he traveled to Harvard for his 15-year reunion, where classmates showered him with accolades.

At political functions, Republicans sidle up to praise him and urge that he run for office.

The attention is seductive, but whether Unz will use his credentials to achieve more political success is unclear. California history is littered with individuals who championed winning initiatives but never ventured much farther in the political world. Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann—the twin forces behind Proposition 13—and Ward Connerly, the face behind Proposition 209, are but three examples.

“He clearly conducted himself in the 227 campaign with dignity, in a way that earned him respect,” said Steve Merksamer, a GOP lawyer and strategist. “I think he could have a political future, but there’s a big difference between succeeding with an initiative and winning a campaign for elective office.”

Moreover, success with one initiative by no means guarantees victory with another. “It’s tough—and rare—to find an issue that strikes a chord like 227 did,” said Dan Schnur, a GOP political analyst.

Although Unz politely declines to talk in depth about his plans, he makes it clear that the bilingual education initiative was by no means his last.

There will be a sequel, and, as if to confirm it, this message slipped out of his fortune cookie during a recent Chinese lunch:

“Be sure to use your talents to attract others,” Unz read aloud, flashing a broad grin.