



## Army stint helps gay-rights defender.(Knight Ridder Newspapers)



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Despite a few obstacles, Timothy Higdon is up to the formidable challenge of leading the campaign to preserve Miami-Dade County's gay-rights ordinance.

"The pressure I feel is, 'Can I reach out to all the different communities that live here in Miami,'" said Higdon, the new executive director and campaign manager for SAVE Dade, the gay-rights group that lobbied for the ordinance in 1998. "I'm not a local guy, I'm not Cuban and I'm not bilingual."

Higdon says he brings his own strength to the campaign: a cool demeanor learned from 15 years in the U.S. Army.

This is Higdon's first time running a political campaign. "I've run military campaigns before. There are a lot of similarities," Higdon said.

Besides fundraising, Higdon will manage SAVE Dade, make campaign decisions and encourage voter registration. The group wants to raise \$1.4 million for the campaign.

SAVE Dade hired Higdon as the group's 90-day interim director in January. Last week, the job became full time.

"Timothy's many years in the military gave him a lot of management experience," SAVE Dade Chairwoman Heddy Pena said. "He's a phenomenal fundraiser."

SAVE Dade is adding six other paid workers.

"We're hiring a diverse staff. At least one will be Hispanic and bilingual," Pena said.

Higdon, 41, grew up in Indiana. "My parents were fundamentalist Christians. It was as white bread as you can get," he said. "There was nobody in my life who was

gay. There were no role models... . It was a sin and a discipline issue."

After one semester at a Christian college, Higdon enlisted in the military. "I joined the Army to try and change myself," he said. "It obviously didn't work."

Higdon was a commissioned officer for 15 years, including eight years of active duty. "I was one of the highest-ranking Army officers in the Port of New Orleans."

Higdon left as an Army major in 1998. Then, he came out of the closet.

"My mother, she cried. The first question she asked me was if I was healthy. I said yes. She said a mother could not ask for anything more.

"My father was upset. He said he didn't understand, but that I am their son and they love me. My coming out enhanced our relationship. You can't have a good relationship with your parents when you are hiding who you are."

After the Army, Higdon held several jobs. "I stayed in Louisiana and sold surgical implants for head and neck surgeries," he said. Later, he worked for IBM selling computer hardware.

After moving to New York, Higdon started a consulting business and began working with several gay-rights groups, including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"I worked in communities under attack by anti-gay legislation," he said, including cities in Oregon, Texas and Florida. Last year, he did fundraising and volunteer work for SAVE Dade.

About six months ago, Higdon decided to "do activism full time," he said. "I interviewed for positions in Vermont, Nevada, Oregon. Then, I found out this job was open."

Late last year, SAVE Dade Executive Director Jorge Mursuli resigned to become Florida director of People For The American Way, a liberal activist group.

During his four years with SAVE Dade \_ the first two as a volunteer \_ Mursuli successfully lobbied for passage of a Miami-Dade ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Take Back Miami-Dade, a coalition of 400 organizations and community leaders against the ordinance, then petitioned voters to force a countywide referendum on the issue. The vote will be Sept. 10.

Mursuli said it is best that someone like Higdon run SAVE Dade's upcoming

campaign.

"I had so much passion. I had so much personally invested. It became more than a job," said Mursuli, 41, who was born in Cuba, raised in Brooklyn and moved to Miami in 1977 \_ the same year Dade voters overwhelmingly rejected the county's first gay-rights ordinance.

"At some point, it became good to step back and let someone take it from there and look at it with a fresh set of eyes and inject a whole new perspective," Mursuli said.

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