Faces of the fight for food labeling

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Across California, people from a variety of backgrounds — and for a variety of reasons — showed incredible commitment to Prop 37, the ballot initiative for labeling GE food. While the measure was narrowly defeated, the movement grew stronger and the issue was put back on the national agenda.

Here, we pause to reflect on the dedication and hard work of just a few of those involved in this momentous fight.

Some faces may be recognizable, while others operated largely behind the scenes. Regardless, because of their commitment and effort — in concert with thousands of others across the state — we advanced an issue that garnered support from over 4.5 million Californians. And together, we shifted the public understanding about why labeling GE food matters.

Pamm Larry: Kick-starter

In September 2011, Pamm Larry — a farmer and midwife from Chico — awoke to a frustration about the lack of information available to Americans, and especially Californians, about our food and food system. In particular, she felt betrayed by federal officials who had failed to label genetically engineered foods.

Pamm focused her frustration into action, kick-starting efforts to launch the ballot initiative in California that became Proposition 37. She is largely credited with spurring thousands of Californians — especially mothers — to get involved in local chapters of LabelGMOs.org. Through persistence, constant communication and support of volunteers, she helped to grow a strong network of people working to raise the profile of GE labeling. “[Our] commitment to this campaign has ignited the

whole country," she said.

Vanessa Lee: Mother

Vanessa Lee lives in South Los Angeles, and works as a hairdresser. For a long time, she had been concerned about the food that her two young daughters were eating, and emphasized a diet of fresh fruits and vegetables over processed foods. She heard about the Prop 37 campaign, and through a PAN organizer, became very involved.

Vanessa helped make phone calls to potential campaign volunteers, wrote letters to editors of local newspapers, and collected pledge signatures outside grocery stores. Vanessa took on each of these tasks enthusiastically, and later helped organize a media event in South L.A. Not only did she help put the event together (despite having never done this type of work before), she was a powerful speaker at the event, drawing media and public attention to the need to know more about what's in our food and how it's grown.

Phil McGrath: Farmer

Phil McGrath began by distributing literature at his Camarillo farm stand, and from there became increasingly involved in the "Right to Know" campaign.

> Farmers want to know. We should all know. This is mainly about receiving information.

Phil reached out to his CSA and farm-member lists, and helped develop a plan to contact voters. But his efforts didn't stop there.

Putting even more energy into the campaign, he spoke at several media events, lobbied — and won an endorsement from — the Los Angeles City Council, and was featured in a television advertisement that aired in the final days of the campaign. Phil explains his commitment by pointing to the high stakes involved: "My farm business and the food system are at stake."

Sylvia Huerta: Grandmother

Sylvia Huerta is a grandmother and organizer with the Latino chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) in Salinas. During the Prop 37 campaign, she spoke on several radio stations, knocked on doors in Salinas and made phone calls to get people talking about the "Right to Know" proposition.

Why did she and her friends and family put so much energy into the campaign? She very clearly saw genetically engineered crops as marketing tools used by corporations to increase pesticide use:

> I got involved with the fight against GMOs and for labeling because for me, health always comes first. We need to know what we are eating. We know that pesticides cause a lot of cancer out here, especially in women. We need to stop this from happening.

Sylvia energetically reached out to Latino voters in Monterey County and helped secure majority support there.

These are just a few of the thousands of people that fought for Prop 37 and GE food labeling in California. Coming from all walks of life and all across the state, each brought to bear their unique passions and perspectives on this issue, inspiring PAN staff daily along the way.

And despite the defeat, the good news is that these people — and tens of thousands like them — are ready to keep up the fight.

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