

Sunday, February 9, 2003

Making their move Online anti-war movement, in full flower with TV ad, thrives thanks to computer-savvy Berkeley couple

[Charles Burrell, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)



Berkeley -- The Berkeley couple who once won fame for putting flying toasters on the world's sleeping computer screens is famous again -- this time for waking up the computer world to serve as a powerful anti-war tool.

Moveon.org, the brainchild of Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, has moved on from its beginning as an anti-impeachment movement during the Clinton administration four years ago and now ranks in the minds of many as the nation's leading pioneer of harnessing the Internet for political activism. Moveon.org's best-known recent feat -- the "daisy" TV ad linking war with Iraq to a nuclear bomb explosion -- was made possible by thousands of donations from moderate, middle-class, mostly liberal Americans who have joined the group's growing online community, which now has 750,000 members in the United States and 380,000 abroad.

Working from their North Berkeley home on laptops, the 42-year-old Boyd and 46-year-old Blades are still amazed, despite their history of accomplishments, at the powerful force they've unleashed.

"I believe we're the largest grass-roots organization that can mobilize on a dime," said the Berkeley-born Blades, an artist and lawyer by training who wrote a book on divorce mediation.

"People are really frustrated -- they're trying to be heard," added Boyd, a computer whiz since age 14 who dropped out of college, designed ground-breaking software for blind computer users and guided the couple's company, Berkeley Systems, to become a 120-employee, \$30 million-a-year enterprise before they sold it in 1997. The company was best known for its After Dark flying-toaster screen-savers and "You Don't Know Jack" computer games.

"They're the leading edge," said an admiring Michael Kieschnick, president of Working Assets, an 18-year-old telephone company with a progressive political agenda that also has tried to organize online.

"They've combined the reach and the cost-effectiveness of the Internet with real live, on-the-street and in-the-office, face-to-face volunteerism," he said.

Columbia University journalism Professor Todd Gitlin said Moveon.org "surely must be the most effective Internet effort around, at least on the left side of center."

Moveon.org has been turning heads with record-setting fund-raising for congressional candidates and rapid mobilization of thousands of citizens across the nation for old-fashioned exercises in democracy, like visiting local offices of members of Congress with petitions signed by their constituents.

While previous issues included gun control and campaign-finance reform, now the focus is the Bush administration's push for attacking Iraq. Moveon.org belongs to the coalition sponsoring anti-war demonstrations next Saturday in New York and Sunday in San Francisco, but its primary focus remains centered on complementary forms of anti-war pressure.

The computer background of Blades and Boyd has made them very nimble in the age of cyber-politics.

When Moveon.org asked its members in December for a full-page New York Times ad against war with Iraq, more than \$300,000 poured in within 48 hours, at an average of \$36 per donor, Blades said.

"It's been very heartening, when you send out an appeal and the response is 10 times what you expect," Blades said.

Yet that was peanuts compared with campaign fund-raising by the organization's political action committee for congressional candidates -- nearly \$2.4 million for 30 anti-impeachment congressional candidates in 2000. Never had so much money been raised so quickly on the Internet. Campaign consultants started paying close attention.

Last year, the group raised \$4.1 million for two dozen congressional candidates who act "in the broad interest of the American public," such as listening more to public opinion than big-money donors or opposing a rush to war against Iraq. Boyd said he expects that donations will swell to \$10 million in the 2004 elections.

The group made headlines in local papers three weeks ago when about 9,000 Moveon.org members showed up in small delegations on Jan. 21 with "Let the Inspections Work" petitions at more than 400 home offices of U.S. senators and representatives across the nation.

"We are in every conceivable way a national group," Boyd said in a recent interview with the jeans-clad couple in their sunny dining room while their two kids were at school. "Out of nowhere we became a catalyst or leader in this because we are a mainstream group."

Blades described Moveon.org as "bipartisan and issue-focused," though she acknowledged that most members are Democrats.

Mindful of their broad appeal, the couple shy away from identifying their Berkeley connection, calling themselves "Silicon Valley entrepreneurs" on their Web site and press statements.

"Berkeley has been typecast," Blades explained.

They said the city is perceived as "fringey," a word that cannot be applied to their own politics. Asked whether they had been politically active before they began Moveon.org, they shook their heads. Blades added half apologetically, "We've always voted."

But a year after they sold Berkeley Systems, they found themselves unable to endure the nation's preoccupation with the Monica Lewinsky scandal and decided to turn their computer skills to expressing the frustration they saw among ordinary citizens across the country.

Why have their Internet petitions and fund-raising efforts been more successful than others?

The pair say they respond to what their members want. The members influence priorities and strategies through the ActionForum section of the group's Web site. It's a reader-rated forum that allows ideas with broad support to rise to the top.

"That communication is what keeps us honest," said Boyd. "We can't do anything our membership doesn't want us to do."

Blades and Boyd also credit their paid staff: Executive Director Peter Schurman in San Francisco, political action committee head Zack Exley in Washington, D.C., operations chief Carrie Olson in Berkeley and, in New York, international campaigns director Eli Pariser, a recent college graduate who independently started an anti-war petition that became Moveon.org's peace campaign.

Also key is Boyd's computer savvy at allowing Moveon.org to maintain two-way communication with tens of thousands of members and efficiently organize grass-roots efforts all across the country.

But the force that seems most to propel their extraordinary commitment is a belief that democracy is imperiled by big-money politics and that ways must be found to restore power to ordinary people.

"That's really what we're trying to do -- to use the technology for demonstrating democratic participation," said Boyd. "And it really works."

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