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Consumer activist savors victory of court ruling

By James V. Grimaldi
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An office worker bolted into a stylish Wilshire Boulevard office building Thursday morning, gripping 59 pages of a Supreme Court ruling that could spell the future of a fledgling consumer group.

He ran down the hall into the cluttered office of consumer activist Harvey Rosenfield, founder of the grass-roots political group Voter Revolt, which put the landmark auto and property liability insurance-reform initiative, Proposition 103, on the ballot.

"Oh, man!" Rosenfield's voice echoed down the carpeted corridor as he read the ruling. "We got it! We got it!"

The victory symbolized the dramatic success that Rosenfield has attained and it marked the transition of the once low-budget crusade of blue jeans-clad consumer renegades to a sophisticated and powerful California political organization with an agenda of issues ranging from property taxes to health care.

The recently found political clout translated into demands for Rosenfield's time Thursday. Within minutes of the ruling, dozens of reporters from television, radio and newspapers deluged Rosenfield with phone calls. Camera crews poked their lenses in his doorway just after the ruling was released. "Good Morning America" wanted him for a live interview.

A KCBS-TV reporter promised to put Rosenfield and the Prop. 103 news ahead of the Oliver North verdict on the noon broadcast if Rosenfield agreed to appear live. He did.

Radio talk-show host Michael Jackson asked for a live interview and Rosenfield was ready.

"I think this is like a prairie wildfire that is sweeping the nation," Rosenfield said, employing the kind of vivid metaphors that he sprinkled throughout the fall campaign. "This will give the go-ahead

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Rosenfield led a statewide band of volunteers on a signature campaign and led a \$79.9 million insurance-industry assault in the fall. Suddenly, he was commanding a 200,000-strong consumer network that won the attention of media and politicians, including Sen. Alan Robbins, the Van Nuys Democrat who called from the Senate floor to congratulate him.

Pundits are paying attention.

"I don't think Harvey is going to fade away," said Larry Berg, a UCLA political science professor.

"Harvey is a real populist. He does want to see things change. And the initiative is a ready-made forum for him. I think that after all the publicity he got during that campaign, he couldn't just go back to what he was doing," Berg said.

Thursday's victory left Voter Revolt in perfect position for its next initiative battle, said Bill Zimmerman, who managed the Prop. 103 campaign. The issues under consideration include crime and health care.

Zimmerman favors a Voter Re-

volt initiative that he wrote. The measure would cut homeowners' insurance more than Prop. 13 did a decade ago, but would raise business taxes 2.2 percent to pay for housing programs.

"I don't think the issue is as focused as the insurance issue was, but I think it reflects problems that are genuine and are crying out for solutions," he said.

Zimmerman acknowledges that property insurance might not "evoke the outrage of the public" that car insurance did, but Voter Revolt now can count on donations from a solid base of support.

The November election and the court battle that followed left Voter Revolt with 200,000 names of dedicated backers, including an Orange County developer who donated the Wilshire Boulevard offices. Zimmerman declined to reveal the donor's name.

Rosenfield's midcity Los Angeles office overlooks an insurance company office building and the Hollywood sign, a far different setting from the group's first home: a drafty warehouse down the alley from an X-rated theater in Santa Monica.

While Rosenfield's anti-insurance-industry rhetoric hasn't toned down since the election, his wardrobe has changed.

The Ralph Nader protege, whose workers teased him that even the usually rumpled Nader made fun of his ties, sported a preppier look Thursday. He wore a blue pinpoint Oxford cloth shirt and bright red tie.

Rosenfield said he has no plans to convert the attention he garnered into a run for political office, although the Supreme Court has upheld the provision requiring that the insurance commissioner be elected next year.

"I have the best job in the state of California right now," Rosenfield said. "I love being a consumer advocate."