

Currents

HARVEY THE CONQUEROR

Popular Prop. 103 author still fighting insurance war

LOS ANGELES — At 5 feet 6, Harvey Rosenfield is not a typical conquering warrior. But try telling him that.

"The message we're sending to the auto insurance companies is: Obey (Proposition) 103 or we'll kick your butts out of California," he said in his Los Angeles Voter Revolt office last week.

You may have trouble persuading the people and press of California otherwise.

Reporters, photographers and cameramen treat Rosenfield like an old drinking buddy, rather than the controversial author of Proposition 103, the insurance proposition that promised drivers a 20 percent rollback of 1987 insurance premium prices.

"Hey, Harvey, how ya doin'?" asked one reporter, with a hearty slap on the back at a recent press conference.

"Go get 'em, Harv," shouted another,

flashing a thumbs-up signal.

People call, write and stop him on the street, urging him to run for state insurance commissioner or even governor.

In the midst of all the turmoil surrounding Proposition 103, he's still their hero — their best hope in the battle against powerful insurance companies and escalating premium rates.

Rosenfield, 37, tries to shake off the adoration.

"I'm not the one who should take all the credit. The people should. They're the ones who voted for Prop. 103," he said. "It's not me that's hot. It's the issue."

But some groups disagree. In fact, the insurance industry lays the blame for many of the state's insurance headaches today in Rosenfield's lap.

"Harvey sold the public a real bill of goods with Proposition 103," said Jim Snyder, president of the Sacramento-based Personal Insurance Federation of California. "He exploited everyone's

frustration over insurance prices, while completely ignoring what caused prices to rise in the first place. Then he promised huge rate rollbacks without saying where the money's going to come from.

"Harvey is driven by an incomprehensible hatred of the insurance industry. He feels anyone or anything associated with insurance is criminal. It's because of his ignorance of the insurance system and his deceiving the public that we have this whole mess.

"Harvey's no more qualified to solve insurance problems than he is to take out my appendix."

Rosenfield smiles. He has heard these accusations before, since the mid-1988 insurance propositions war pitted Rosenfield's 103 against a host of other measures — one favored by the trial lawyers, another by the insurance industry and two others by independent sources.

But after his Proposition 103 won by a slight margin, he thought the major battle was over. He was mistaken.

"Sure, I expected to have to continue the fight to get it fully implemented.

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The San Diego Union

Insurance reformer Harvey Rosenfield: "It's not me that's hot. It's the issue."

Rosenfield—

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But I never expected the insurance companies to blatantly evade and disobey the law," Rosenfield said. "We knew they hated it, but we expected them to do what we all have to do in a democracy — uphold the law. Boy, were we wrong."

Proposition 103 promised drivers a 20 percent rollback from 1987 premium prices. The law also makes the insurance commissioner an elected official, and scheduled the first election for November 1990. Since Proposition 103 was approved by voters in 1988, consumers have seen few, if any, rebates.

But Rosenfield maintains Proposition 103 can still work, despite the problems. He is optimistic his measure will be carried out, but probably not until "the right person is elected insurance commissioner."

He says that right person is Conway Collis, a member of the State Board of Equalization. Rosenfield devotes many evening and weekend hours to the Collis campaign.

He says the only things standing in the way of consumers getting their rollbacks are the current commissioner, Roxani Gillespie, and the insurance companies.

"Where's the money going to come from, they want to know? From their greed and out of their massive profits. Out of their multimillion-dollar insurance executive salaries and their wasteful and frivolous spending habits," he raves.

"I'm the first to admit that Roxani Gillespie and the insurance industry have completely undermined Proposition 103. It's a travesty. The vast majority of people in California are in worse shape now because of them. And people are fed up."

That's why he's stumping for his latest initiative, the Proposition 103 Enforcement Act. The measure provides that if by Sept. 1, 1991, insurance rates are not reduced to 20 percent below 1987 levels, private auto insurers will be replaced by a new,

publicly controlled California Non-Profit Insurance Fund.

Rosenfield says this would mean the end of private auto insurance companies in this state and the automatic lowering of rates for consumers.

"This should assure people of getting their rollbacks. It's going to take some time, though. Proposition 103 is basically toilet training the insurance industry. It's a messy job and requires some patience."

After nearly 12 years as a consumer activist, Rosenfield is familiar with messy jobs, and patience.

After obtaining degrees in law and international economics from Georgetown University in Washington, the Boston native worked briefly for a law firm and then on Capitol Hill. But it was during a summer he worked for Ralph Nader's Congress Watch, earning \$600 for the entire three months, that he found his niche.

"Watching Ralph, working for him and helping him help people was the best job of all," he said.

At Nader's request, Rosenfield moved to California in 1981 to work on consumer issues, including organizing and leading the California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG).

After four years of long hours and seven-day work weeks, he was burned out. Exhausted, he hit the beach near his Santa Monica apartment with a boogie board and about 50 books, for nearly a year of reading and relaxation.

In the spring of 1986, Nader once again summoned him, this time to lead the unsuccessful California campaign against insurance-backed Proposition 51, the "deep pockets" initiative.

After voters approved that measure, which made it harder for accident victims to collect damages from government and non-profit organizations, Rosenfield decided to fashion his own major insurance reform initiative — Proposition 103.

That same year, he formed Access to Justice, a non-profit citizen advocacy group devoted to insurance reform. It later evolved into Voter Re-

volt, the grassroots citizen organization that campaigned door-to-door statewide for Proposition 103.

Four years ago, Rosenfield's office was a closet in his apartment. He worked 12- to 16-hour days, every day, and was lucky to make \$20,000 a year.

Rosenfield has changed over the years, but not much. He's a bit more domestic — he and his wife, artist/actress Georgia Bragg, have a 2½-month-old daughter — and his organization has grown.

He and his staff of nine work out of a humbly furnished office suite in Los Angeles that they rent for \$1 a month from a sympathetic landlord. Rosenfield still works long hours, but last year he made \$40,000, the most money he's ever earned.

"For more than a year it was just me, by myself, organizing other groups and educating the public and press about the insurance industry," he said. "We've come a long way."

Critics say he hasn't come far enough.

In an interview last September, Gillespie called his outspoken, brash style "unorthodox." Insurers have called him "loud-mouthed," "irreverent" and "immature."

They point to the media stunts he orchestrated during the 1988 campaign. Like the time he surrounded himself with armed guards when he displayed the signed petitions that put Proposition 103 on the ballot, to portray the insurance industry as dangerous. Or when he delivered a truckload of horse manure to the front of Farmers Insurance Group's Los Angeles office building.

"I admit we did those things. But sometimes a picture is worth a zillion words. I still can't find a better way to express how I felt about Proposition 104," he said of the insurance industry's 1988 no-fault initiative. "My only regret is that I didn't dump it right on Farmer's front lawn."

Rosenfield's stunts seemed to pay off. His low-budget crusade got him the kind of television and newspaper coverage that cost the insurance industry millions of dollars to buy.

Ralph Nader lent his support, and soon seven other Voter Revolt offices opened throughout the state, including a 14-staff member group in San Diego.

At a recent staff briefing at the Orange County office, a roomful of Voter Revolt workers listened as Rosenfield explained the continuing campaign for Proposition 103 enforcement. They laughed at all his jokes and nodded at all the appropriate times, clearly enthralled.

With an average annual income of \$10,000, it's obvious they're not doing this for the money.

"Of course, we're here because we believe in what we're doing. But we're also here because we believe in Harvey," said Bill Westermeyer, campaign director for the Orange County Voter Revolt office. "Harvey is absolutely uncompromising. He's not satisfied until he gets done what he sets out to do."

Nader agreed.

"People believe in Harvey Rosenfield because they know he won't sell out. He's not about to cut a deal. He sees a giant industry defying the law, and he just isn't going to put up with it," Nader said from his Washington office. "It's people with his kind of principles and convictions that make a democracy."

Sounds like the kind of praise political candidates are made of.

Rosenfield shook his head.

"No way. I have absolutely no political aspirations," he said. "I'm content to do exactly what I'm doing for the rest of my life — being the head of Voter Revolt, working for the people. We don't always succeed, but I really feel it's the right thing to do."