

Gill finds niche in results-oriented activism **Political group wins bipartisan praise for gay rights work**

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By JOSHUA LYNSEN

After he joined Gill Action last year, Patrick Guerriero quickly learned he had some explaining to do.

Many gay activists, Guerriero said, were unfamiliar with the bipartisan gay issues advocacy organization bankrolled by millionaire philanthropist Tim Gill.

But they were curious. And the organization's first executive director soon found himself answering a barrage of questions.

"What is Gill Action? Is it going to compete with us?" Guerriero recalls activists asking. "So we talked about what we are and what we hope to do."

The organization's goal, to end the injustices and inequalities gays face, is ambitious. And Gill's vision, described by Guerriero as realizing "full equality for all LGBT people in the shortest timetable possible," is bold.

But if Guerriero's learned anything in the eight months since he joined Gill Action, it's that gay activists across the country are prepared to realize Gill's dream.

"I've discovered there are places that are worthy of our investment that's going to be exciting," he said. "Some of these organizations that have been quietly doing their work without a lot of help are right on the edge of huge advancements."

That work often just needs a final, financial push. And that, Guerriero said, is what Gill Action can provide.

Investment approach

Gill Action, based in Denver, is a 501(c)(4) issue advocacy organization. Like similarly structured organizations, it can engage in political battles, endorse candidates and fund campaigns.

What distinguishes Gill Action, though, is its bipartisan outlook and capitalistic methods.

Gill Action money supports both Democratic and Republican campaigns. But whoever receives a check, Guerriero said, must prove they've used the money to bring about "immediate, measurable results" that advance gay rights.

"Compared to other organizations," he said, "this is very different."

Leading gay activists, including partisan players on both sides of the aisle, have applauded the approach.

Patrick Sammon, president of Log Cabin Republicans, said Gill Action is wise to focus on quantifiable results.

"I think we need to be focused on the bottom line," he said. "The bottom line is equality. The bottom line is victories. The bottom line is success. And I think we shouldn't lose sight of that."

John Marble, a National Stonewall Democrats spokesperson, agreed. He said the theory that Gill Action has applied is tested and true.

"It's true in the business world," he said, "and it's true in the organizing world."

Leaders of politically independent gay organizations also said Gill Action is on the right track.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said Gill Action holds its funding recipients accountable but doesn't put them under undue pressure.

"They're not saying that you have to win in three years," he said. "They're saying that they want to see measurable outcomes in three years. And I think that's appropriate."

Uneven returns?

But one political analyst said Gill Action's investment approach is yielding uneven returns.

Ron Shaiko, a senior research fellow at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for Public Policy & the Social Sciences at Dartmouth College, said Gill Action helped defeat several anti-gay politicians in 2006.

Efforts to fight marriage amendments across the nation, though, floundered. Gill Action's \$75,000 donation to the Commonwealth Coalition in Virginia, for example, failed to turn the tide.

"That all or nothing strategy has failed miserably," Shaiko said. "To the extent that Gill Action bankrolled that strategy, they can't help but look bad as a result of that."

Still, he said, Gill Action isn't fully to blame for the amendment losses.

"In some respects, they were buying a lemon when they got into those," Shaiko said. "They certainly inherited a lot of nonsense, and a lot of situations that would be hard to remedy even with as much money as they have."

He said the losses in Virginia and elsewhere simply showed that Gill must do better at picking his fights.

"But, I think he's got the methodology and the kind of strategy that can endure," Shaiko said.

'People want results'

Despite some misfires, Guerriero said Gill Action remains sure of its investment approach.

"People want results," he said, "and Gill Action is going to hold people's feet to the fire and measure results."

It's also committed to bipartisan work. Guerriero, the former president of Log Cabin Republicans, is working alongside Robin Brand, a Democrat, and Bill Smith, a Republican, in Gill Action's office in Washington, D.C.

Brand, a former vice president of the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund, serves as chief operating officer, while Smith, a former campaign consultant who worked for Karl Rove, is the organization's national political director.

"I think there's an opportunity for the whole movement to open a new chapter of working collaboratively and seeing new results," Guerriero said, "and we want to really help cement that."

David Smith, HRC's vice president of programs, lauded the bipartisan approach.

“We all want LGBT people treated equally under the law,” he said. “That’s what we’re fighting for. And there’s room for all comers in that fight.”

That’s also why, Smith said, HRC sees Gill Action not as a competitor but as a collaborator.

“I don’t see competition,” he said. “I see working toward the same goal, which is achieving equality for LGBT Americans. I think we are working together very cooperatively, collaboratively and strategically.”

Guerrero agreed. He said HRC and Gill Action are unique entities.

“We really value the fact that there’s some smart, large national membership-based organization,” he said. “It’s just not the way we’re designed or the way we function.”

That’s not stopped some political observers from asserting one organization bests the other.

Gay blogger and author Andrew Sullivan noted in his blog that 50 of the 70 politicians Gill Action targeted last year were defeated.

“Funny how the Human Rights Campaign has sucked millions out of gay wallets,” he wrote, “and never achieved anything like this success.”

But those victories did not come cheap. According to public records, Gill Action spent \$3.5 million in 2006, and Gill wrote personal checks to political candidates and causes totaling more than \$10 million.

Some observers noted the statistics — while impressive for an organization that remains young — only underscore the need for gay organizations to work together.

Foreman said only through collaborative efforts will gay Americans defeat “our most ardent opponents” in political arenas, and pass new rights and protections.

“Gill Action, by itself, is not going to make all that happen,” he said. “But I think it’s going to be an essential ingredient.”

Gill Action is separate from the Gill Foundation, an organization that gives about 250 grants annually to support gay causes. That organization recently named Tim Sweeney as its executive director. Sweeney previously served as executive director of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York and the Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund.