

It's time for the LGBT Community to Support Immigrants

May 25, 2007

By Glenn D. Magpantay

A year ago, immigrants and their supporters marched in city streets across the country to protest a draconian Congressional bill that would criminalize undocumented immigrants. Today, Congress has tried to find a middle ground, but we have yet to see any expansion of immigrants' rights.

May is Asian American Heritage month and this month Asian Americans are mobilizing to press for immigration reform. Of the nation's 13 million Asian Americans, two-thirds are foreign-born but more and more are becoming citizens through naturalization.

It's time for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community to stand with Asian Americans, and all compassionate and fair-minded Americans, to support dignity and fairness for immigrants.

As LGBT people, we have something to say about the struggle for equality. LGBTs know well what it means to be criminalized, scapegoated, and subjected to discrimination. Immigrants know the same well too. The LGBT community should not be silent as Congress debates the fate of millions of immigrants in our country. Some of our leaders have spoken out, but for the other side.

A year ago, Jasmyne Cannick, a Board member of the National Black Justice Coalition and Black Caucus cochair of Stonewall Democrats, wrote "Gays first, then illegals" in the Advocate.com [April 2006].

She advocated for marriage equality but reasoned that it would be "a slap in the face to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to take up the debate on whether to give people who are in this country illegally additional rights when we haven't even given the people who are here legally all of their rights."

Cannick wrote, "Immigration reform needs to get in line behind the LGBT civil rights movement." She then had the audacity to quote Audre Lorde in support of her nativist views. But it was Lorde who also said, "There is no hierarchy of oppressions."

Many of us shunned Cannick as narrow-minded and as an embarrassment to those of us who support freedom and equality. We were all hoping to move on.

But then, at the end of last year, Rosie O'Donnell made a defamatory remark on national television. In December, she used the racial slur "ching chong" several times on The View to mock Chinese-Language media professionals. Several Asian American organizations protested her racial insensitivity. Not surprisingly no LGBT groups spoke out. Though Rosie was the gay community's hero, she became symbolic of those who taunt and jeer Asian Americans.

As a whole LGBT community, we have a shared responsibility to make up for these transgressions by gay leaders and we should do so by pressing for the rights of immigrants. Moreover, such rights will also benefit our own community. Countless LGBT people are

immigrants themselves. Immigrants' rights must be incorporated into the struggle for queer liberation. Indeed, we have similar goals as Congress is considers proposals on immigration reform.

We are fighting for our families. Immigrants are fighting for policies that promote family reunification. Immigrants and their children should be together. LGBT people are fighting for the recognition of our families as well. Cannick and O'Donnell have championed the right to marry and for gay parents to adopt children. We should strengthen and expand families, not tear them apart.

We are fighting for healthy work environments. Immigrants are seeking labor protections so that migrant and other undocumented workers are treated with dignity and respect. LGBT people are seeking something similar, through employment non-discrimination laws and anti-harassment policies. We all hope for secure jobs, full employment, and work protections.

And there are other issues that we must champion. Congress must address the detention and deportation of Muslims, South Asians, and Southeast Asians. Many queer South Asian activists have been at the forefront in challenging this racial profiling.

Local law enforcement should not be required to enforce complicated federal immigration laws. LGBTs of color and LGBT youth know well the problems with police misconduct and police brutality. Police should not be allowed to profile, detain, and interrogate those whom they simply believe may be out of immigration status.

Immigration reform must include a real path to legalization for those who are undocumented, the reunification of binational same-sex couples, and an easier process to apply for political asylum.

Last year, only the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had issued a statement calling for humane immigration reform. The Task Force understood that those who despise immigrants have no love for LGBTs either.

This year, the whole LGBT community must stand up for immigrant's rights. Until we are all free, none of us are free.

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