



Straight Allies Join Gay Causes

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The decision to become a full-time activist was easy for Alex Shoor to make. The southern media field strategist for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation joined the media watchdog in September 2005 after graduating from Nashville's Vanderbilt University. Describing gay rights as "one of the major social movements" of his generation, he wanted to be a part of history in the making.

"As a progressive striving for a more just America, I cannot stand by and watch clearly discriminatory laws and practices perpetuated against LGBT Americans," Shoor told EDGE in a recent interview from GLAAD's New York offices. "I just felt a calling to be part of the movement for LGBT equality."

Ordinarily, someone taking a job at a gay advocacy organization would hardly rank as worthy of note. But Shoor has a quality that makes him stand out from the pack.

Alex Shoor is a heterosexual.

Perhaps what makes Shoor so remarkable is that he is becoming, well, not all that remarkable. In fact, Shoor is just one of a growing number of straight allies who have joined the ranks of the movement for LGBT rights in recent years.

While the movement continues to struggle with thorny questions of how to court straight people (and lawmakers) to support marriage for gay and lesbian couples, LGBT hate crime legislation and other political, legislative and movement priorities, people like Shoor may become more critical to getting our point across to the wider world.

Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays remains the face of this increased LGBT-straight alliance within the movement. It claims more than 200,000 members and over 500 chapters around the world. The Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and other organizations have followed suit with initiatives, campaigns and messages tailored specifically to straight allies and potential donors.

PFLAG Senior Field & Policy Coordinator Jamie Curtis joined the Washington-based organization in May 2003 after she learned how many of her friends struggled with family members after they came out or suffered discrimination. She has become the chief architect behind the Straight for Equality campaign PFLAG plans to launch in October.

Curtis, like Shoor, was quick to point out she feels the fight for LGBT equality affects everyone. "Whether gay or straight, this is an important issue facing our generation," she said. "I wanted to be on the right side looking back."

Long-time Fire Island Pines resident Jack Lichtenstein readily agreed. He and his wife Rita have

summered in the predominantly gay resort off the South Shore of Long Island since the early 1960s. Since that time, the Lichtensteins have become prominent contributors to a number of gay organizations, including Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, which came about in large part thanks to Jack Lichtenstein's seed money in the 1970s.

Today, the couple continue to maintain a busy philanthropic schedule with their financial support of Lambda Legal, the Point Foundation and other LGBT organizations.

Lichtenstein proudly pointed out his activism began in the pre-Stonewall era. The Suffolk County Police Department arrested dozens of gay men during raids in the Pines and neighboring Cherry Grove, which galvanized the traditionally tranquil hamlets through the late 1960s. The police held these men on sodomy, indecent exposure and other charges in a jail in nearby Patchogue on the mainland until Lichtenstein and others raised money to bail them out.

"I realized there was a need in the gay community for gay rights advocacy," he said. "That put me on the map, so to speak."

Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defender Communications Director Carisa Cunningham joined the movement in 1987 after she accepted a job at the Gay Men's Health Crisis, which employs many nongay specialists and office workers. Cunningham conceded that the thought of a career among gay Gothamites initially attracted her to the agency. The reality of the burgeoning AIDS epidemic, however, soon set in.

"That experience--working in AIDS in New York City in 1987--was just transformative and life-changing for all of us who were there at the time," she said. "I met a lot of courageous, smart and determined people who I wanted to continue to work with."

Cunningham arrived at GLAD's Boston office in 2004. She remains instrumental in the agency's groundbreaking judicial advocacy across New England. Cunningham quickly points out that her colleagues and plaintiffs, such as Massachusetts resident Rhiannon O'Donnabhain, who sued the Internal Revenue Service after it refused to allow her to list sex-reassignment surgery as a deductible medical expense on her federal income tax return, have become additional inspirations to her work in the region.

"Seeing a really courageous plaintiff standing up there and telling her story in very difficult circumstances and watching some really smart attorneys at work is really wonderful," Cunningham said. "I can't really beat that in terms of job satisfaction."

There are no official statistics to indicate exactly how many straight allies work within the movement.

Shoor admitted one of his initial challenges was to figure out how he, as a straight man, could relate to his colleagues at GLAAD and others with whom he comes into contact. A gay activist allayed those concerns with a simple compliment during January 2006 media training in Savannah, Georgia.

"I feel really humble to be part of the movement and to be accepted by so many LGBT folks with whom I work," Shoor said. "The LGBT community has allowed me room to grow."

Curtis painted an equally positive picture. "I have been very lucky and have found a very supportive place and a lot of supportive people in the movement who are very happy to have me," she said.

Cunningham faced initial skepticism from some gay men during her GMHC tenure. She pointed out; however, that her GLAD colleagues have not subjected her to questions about her heterosexuality.

"Nobody here has asked me what do straight people think," Cunningham quipped.

Obvious jokes aside, straight allies will undoubtedly play an increasingly important role within the movement for LGBT rights. NGLTF Executive Director Matt Foreman told EDGE in a statement these allies remain a vital component of his and other organization's advocacy.

"Straight people are incredibly effective in winning other straight people over to our side," he stated. "They speak with fervor and rock-solid conviction, and can never be accused of speaking from self-interest or playing a victim."

Curtis further expressed hope the movement will continue to reach out to more potential straight allies as it seeks to further advance its agenda.

"We try to let them know they are welcome in [the movement]," Curtis said.

Lichtenstein, still active as a lawyer, agreed. "The protection of civil rights is not relegated to any group of folks," he said. "Every group that protects and fights for our civil rights should be dear to all of our hearts. That's our motivation."