



Gay Groups Disagree About Tactics, Goals

by Kilian Melloy
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GLBT equality groups all work toward the same general goal, but not always as effectively as they might: sometimes different groups pull in opposite directions, and often various organizations replicate one another's work.

A June 20 article at Kansas City Info Zine examined the topic of GLBT equality and the many roads that may (or may not) lead there.

The article cited the precedents set by earlier equality movements, such as those for racial minorities and those for women. In those cases, different organizations followed different practices to achieve the same larger goals.

But the devil is in the details, and some of those details are sticking points and areas of division. Marriage equality was cited by the article as one area in which not all GLBT activists are equally invested. Indeed, according to one recent poll, for some GLBT people marriage is not seen as an overriding watermark for equality; rather, older gays see workplace equality and comprehensive hate crimes legislation as far more crucial.

The Info Zine article quoted the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association's deputy executive director, Tom Avila, as saying, "As we start to see more legislation coming through, we're starting to see more opportunities for people to speak vocally about what is and is not as important."

Continued Avila, "For some, marriage is not something they're interested in."

One such individual is Garry Bowie, whom the article also quoted. Said Bowie, "There's certain battles you pick that you know you're going to win."

Continued Bowie, 47, who serves the Long Beach AIDS Foundation as that group's executive director, "You win the small battles because eventually they add up to the big battles."

Bowie pointed to literal life-or-death struggles that the GLBT community might invest in, such as young gays, who in recent years have been becoming infected with HIV at a disproportionate rate; another issue that might outrank marriage is the financial health of gay senior citizens.

Said Bowie in the Info Zine Article, "If we make gay marriage the focus issue, what happens to all of the other issues that are important in our community?"

Bowie also spoke about the different organizations that address the concerns of ever-narrower slices of society, such as gay African-Americans, or gay Christians. Bowie attributed the explosion in narrowly-focused groups in part to the successes that GLBT people have enjoyed in recent years as their cause has picked up steam and won them rights.

But there may be cause for concern that so many smaller organizations serving so many distinct

sub-groups might not succeed as well as fewer, more comprehensive organizations with more resources at their command.

On the other hand, the different groups do form mutual aid coalitions as and when the need might arise: said Roberta Sklar, spokesperson for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "There is a hugely cohesive kind of coalition work that goes on," the Info Zine article reported.

Added Sklar, "You're really seeing a much more integrated movement with considerably sophisticated capacities for different groups to pick up different parts of the job that needs to be done."

Denise Penn, news editor for Lesbian Magazine, recalled how an array of GLBT equality groups banded together to defeat the notoriously anti-gay Briggs Initiative in 1978. The Briggs Initiative was an attempt to make it illegal for gays to hold certain sorts of jobs--specifically, it would have barred gay and lesbian school teachers from entering the classroom. The broad-based opposition was a success, and the Briggs Initiative went down in defeat.

Said Penn, "Sometimes adversity pulls people together." One shining example of this was the recent shift in California, which saw that state become the second in the Union to grant full marriage equality, sparking a veritable matrimonial stampede.

At other times, however, it sparks internal dissonance.

Contrasting the California marriage triumph, the article also looked at last year's heated controversy over the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which was intended originally to be a federal measure meant to usher in workplace protections for America's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered workers.

After the existing bill failed to garner sufficient support, and fearing that the original version would never pass the House of Representatives, Mass. congressman Barney Frank split the bill into parts, with one part, immediately brought to the floor and approved, extending such protections to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals--and the other part, relegated to some future legislative session, containing language pertinent to protecting transgendered employees.

The watered-down, divided bill garnered angry responses from some in the GLBT community, and though the first part of the bill, protecting GLB workers, was approved late in 2007 by the House, the Senate has yet to take it up.

The second part of the bill, pertaining to transgendered workers, remains in limbo.

Said Wake Forest University professor of law Shannon Gilreath, "In many ways, ENDA exposed the fault lines."

Added Gilreath, "The picture was not pretty."

For one thing, America's foremost GLBT lobbying organization, the Human Rights Campaign, failed to condemn the move--and alienated not only transgendered people, including the its single transgendered board member, but also sympathetic GLBs.

With so many questions facing the GLBT community, some have raised the most disturbing question of all: is there any such thing, truly, as a "community" of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Americans?

That's the question posed by Avila, who was quoted in the article as saying, "A lot of the splits happen because we've not all decided we're part of a community."

The ENDA imbroglio was a vivid illustration of this: while many GLBs stood by transgendered people as a matter of principle, many others were willing to leave transgendered people behind and move their own interests ahead while they had a chance.

There are also so many gay organizations now on so many levels--local, state and nationwide--that they're chasing dollars often from the same donor base. Competitiveness is only sharpened when it comes to the most pressing factor of all, said Washington Blade editor Kevin Naff.

"At the end of the day, they're all chasing finite resources. They're all chasing donors." Money is the key that opens all doors, including the door to equality, and there's simply not enough money to satisfy all the needs of all the equality groups.

Naff continued, "They may come together around an event like California, but when California is over, they all go back to raising money and sustaining their organizations."

Said Naff, "There's always going to be a competitiveness that stems from chasing limited resources."

Penn expressed a different thought, the article said, in that more groups means more people will become personally invested in equality for everyone.

The article quoted Penn as saying, "I think that people join groups partly because they want to make a difference and partly because they need social support."

Added Penn, "It's really wonderful that there are so many groups that are very, very different that you can find a place where you feel comfortable."

Even so, the fight to hold on to those hard-won rights is going to take more time, more money, more commitment--and more unity. Said Penn of the fact that anti-gay activists have arranged for a ballot question this Nov. that will ask voters to consider writing family-damaging prejudice into the California constitution, "We as a movement need to get every group together to figure out how we're going to work on this together."

Otherwise, equality may remain a tantalizing dream no matter how many different groups there might be.