



Gay Rights Groups United on Cause, but Can Disagree on Details

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By Alyse Knorr

With hundreds of same-sex couples flocking to California county clerks' offices to be married this week, gay rights groups across the country seem united in celebration.

But, as demonstrated in the civil rights and feminist movements, sharing a common cause does not dictate sharing methods, ideology or priorities.

Some gay people, for instance, don't consider same-sex marriage a priority.

"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," said Tom Avila, deputy executive director for the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. "For some, marriage is not something they're interested in."

Garry Bowie, executive director of the Long Beach AIDS Foundation, is a gay man who does not believe in same-sex marriage.

He said gay men of his age, 47, feel that a federal bill allowing gay marriage in all states is unlikely to happen in their lifetime, and they would rather fight on the fronts of other gay issues.

"There's certain battles you pick that you know you're going to win," Bowie said. "You win the small battles because eventually they add up to the big battles."

Today, Bowie said, these smaller, more realistic battles include aiding gay senior citizens who are struggling financially and protecting gay youths who are at risk for HIV.

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

Many voices, one cause

The many gay rights organizations in the U.S. today seem to cater to the interests of every aspect of society. There are groups for Catholics, blacks, Republicans, students and doctors, to name just a few.

"Since we've made so many gains, we have so many various groups that try to cover a multitude of areas," Bowie said.

With so many organizations representing so many unique points of view, differing opinions on tactics, priorities and goals seem inevitable.

"The groups serve more than one purpose, and it makes sense that they would be different," Lesbian Magazine News Editor Denise Penn said.

Despite the many differences between these groups, they can still work effectively together and

often unite as one voice at the most critical of times.

"While there are different attitudes and strategies about how to get to and achieve a certain goal, in the end the goal is the same," said Karen Ocamb, news editor for IN Los Angeles and Frontiers magazines.

"There is a hugely cohesive kind of coalition work that goes on," National Gay and Lesbian Task Force spokeswoman Roberta Sklar said. "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."

Penn said many different gay rights organizations united in 1978 to fight the Briggs Initiative, a bill that would have banned gay and lesbian teachers from California classrooms. It was defeated.

"Sometimes adversity pulls people together," she said.

Group cooperation: when it happens and when it doesn't

"Generally speaking," said Kevin Naff, editor of the Washington Blade, "I think there have been some recent examples of where the gay rights groups have worked very well together and tried to present a uniform front."

He cited the California marriage ruling as one of those, since the Human Rights Campaign has been working with state and regional groups, including Gay and Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, to shape the public image of this week's same-sex marriages.

"Of course, they don't always work together," Naff said.

One of the biggest examples of disagreement between different gay rights groups lies in the debate over ENDA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act passed by the House of Representatives last year.

The first version of the bill, which would have protected employees from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, included transgender people - individuals who have made the transition from one gender to another. When this version of the bill failed, a revised version, without transgender protection, passed in November 2007. The bill awaits Senate action.

While the Human Rights Campaign supported the bill and lauded it as a great step forward for gay rights, many smaller state groups came out strongly against the bill because of its transgender exclusion.

"In many ways, ENDA exposed the fault lines," said Shannon Gilreath, a Wake Forest University law professor. "The picture was not pretty."

Avila said many of today's differences can be addressed by the basic question, raised by ENDA: Is there an actual LGBT community?

"A lot of the splits happen because we've not all decided we're part of a community," Avila said.

Naff said gay and lesbian people often ally with transgender people because they recognize a common mission of fighting discrimination and gender roles.

"On the other hand," Naff said, "you have a lot of gays and lesbians that say the transgender movement is a different movement and hasn't progressed as far, so why should gay and lesbians have to wait for ENDA because Congress isn't ready to include transgenders?"

Inherent competition?

Aside from ideological splits like the one in the ENDA debate, other more technical obstacles among gay rights organizations can keep them from working effectively together.

Naff said that lately, for example, many smaller, more localized groups have been growing wary of national organizations like the Human Rights Campaign encroaching on their mission.

"If you're a smaller or local organization, you're going to be threatened when a larger group comes in and tries to do your work in your state," Naff said. "It's human nature."

Levi Alter, president of Female to Male International, said the best strategy for these bigger groups is to provide smaller, local groups with training, funding and logistical support, but let them be the face.

"Keep your mouth shut and stay out of their way and let them take the credit," Alter said.

Yet another obstacle to cooperation, Naff said, is the competition for funding.

"At the end of the day, they're all chasing finite resources," Naff said. "They're all chasing donors. 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. There's always going to be a competitiveness that stems from chasing limited resources."

One way to end this competition, Bowie said, is by making groups more highly specialized, each with its own particular mission.

"Because of all of those groups, we have a lot of crossover in our missions," Bowie said. "We have too many communities, too many organizations trying to do the same thing."

Instead of trying to be everything to everyone, Bowie said, groups should try to develop a specialized, particular "brand" identity to distinguish themselves from the crowd and get more work done.

"More" is better

Despite their differences and occasional disagreements, the existence of many groups instead of one is still a better, smarter strategy for gay rights advocacy, said James Vaughn, California statewide director of Log Cabin Republicans, a gay rights Republican organization. Keeping the issues divided and partisan, he said, simply reduces them to a constant battle to control Congress.

And having more groups, Penn said, also allows more people to get involved.

"I think that people join groups partly because they want to make a difference and partly because they need social support," Penn said. "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."

Ocamb said she thinks the dichotomy in strategies and ideology will continue, but that it is by no means a bad thing.

"I think that we all have different ideas and don't have to agree with each other on every single thing," Penn said.

"We might have different reasons why we're doing things, but ultimately it comes down to the same thing," Alter said.

The next arena

Now may be the time for gay rights groups to band together as one again.

A ballot initiative allowing voters to define marriage in the state's constitution as a union between a man and a woman has been certified for California's Nov. 4 election. The California Supreme Court has also decided to re-hear the same-sex marriage case.

"We as a movement need to get every group together to figure out how we're going to work on this together," Penn said.

With stakes this high, cooperation could be critical for success.

"It's really important that we all get together and coordinate our efforts rather than compete," Penn said. "We're all going to get together and hopefully work in a positive way to keep our rights here."