



Conventional Wisdom Is the Goal

By: CHRISTOPHER MURRAY
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Although she snagged only a cameo in the 2005 film "TransAmerica" starring Felicity Huffman, Melissa Sklarz has played a long-standing role as one of the most respected and effective transgender community activists in New York. After proving an important mover in the recently successful push to finally get GENDA, a gender expression non-discrimination bill, through the State Assembly, she was just named one of ten New Yorkers on the Rules Committee of the Democratic National Convention set for Denver this August. In 2004, Sklarz was one of only six transgendered delegates at the convention in Boston.

A director of the New York Trans Rights Organization, she's currently the vice chair of National Stonewall Democrats' board of directors and is a former president of Manhattan's Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats.

By day, Sklarz, 57, is the collections manager at the Actor's Fund Credit Union, having previously worked for Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Gay Games. A former high school varsity athlete, she's a center fielder on the Vikings team in the Big Apple Softball League, where she's played the last eight years.

A 14-year resident of Manhattan, Sklarz recently moved to Woodside in Queens. Growing up on Long Island, she went to her first transgender bar in 1976 and has "never really looked back."

CHRISTOPHER MURRAY: So, you are heading to Denver!

MELISSA SKLARZ: I have been elected to be on the Rules Committee as one of the representatives from New York State at the Democratic National Convention.

CM: Does that mean you are an Obamamaniac?

MS: I was elected as Hillary Clinton supporter, and the New York part of the Rules Committee is made up of about 60 percent former Clinton supporters which is no surprise, since she did so well in New York. State Assemblymember Jonathan Bing was also selected, and he supported Hillary. Gay activist Corey Johnson will come, too, and he is an Obama supporter. For all of us, going on the Rules Committee, but not as delegates, will mean we have credentials and access without having a floor vote.

CM: Are you supporting Obama now? How is he on trans issues?

MS: Yes, I am. He is supportive of a trans-inclusive ENDA [the proposed federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act] and trans-inclusive hate crimes legislation. Those are the two big issues, the only ones that either of the candidates will ruminate on.

After he's elected, Obama may well think more outside the box. But anything progressive that the congressional Democrats manage to pass legislatively will be challenged by the conservatives through legal action and - guess what? - the courts have been thoroughly Republicanized. Just look here in New York State, where we are seeing conservatives suing Governor Paterson for saying he'll recognize any gay marriage performed outside of New York.

CM: Do you think the trans community nationwide shares the optimism of Senator Obama's supporters?

MS: I cannot speak for an entire national community, but here in New York, we are thrilled about the passage of GENDA in the State Assembly. That victory provided for reasonable and serious debate about our community on the floor of the Legislature. So we are doing good here, as for the other 49 states... I think our trans community is used to being victimized and it's hard sometimes to even acknowledge our victories. I think trans people carry their personal hurts and defeats along with them. However, I expect the political environment of 2009 to be very different, and that it will enter the realm of exciting possibility.

CM: Will there be any other trans people at the convention?

MS: From coast to coast, there will be eight or nine of us in Denver, a few more than last time, so we've seen an increase, which is good. In Boston in 2004, the most important thing for us was the coming together of a national trans community working as one to create a foundation for our political process. We had a meeting with the Kerry people with a full national transgender agenda prepared. They were not very open to it, but what we did ask them to do was to stop saying "gay, gay, gay" all the time and instead refer to "the LGBT community," and that they did.

CM: You mentioned the passage of GENDA in the State Assembly, what's the next step there?

MS: Having the bill come before the State Senate. Senator Tom Duane is carrying the bill, but I don't think we have any Republican involvement yet. The Senate has historically been unfriendly to LGBT issues, but we either need to find Republicans to support it, or to take back the Senate, so that's the next step.

CM: What to your mind was the tipping point on passing GENDA in the Assembly?

MS: Well, the Empire State Pride Agenda made it a number-one priority of election year 2008. We got our coalition together - who told their Assembly people, who eventually were able to convince Speaker Sheldon Silver of its importance. The explosion over ENDA in Washington may also have had an impact. But the clear commitment of ESPA is to make the Democrats the majority in the State Senate.

The process for GENDA in the Assembly this year was great. The bill went through quick and easy. I was there for the debate and was very moved by hearing our friends and rather shocked by listening to our enemies, I've never heard firsthand what the conservative Republicans think of our GENDA bill before. I've spent almost ten years trying to convince our Democrat friends this is important and valid. But hearing the Republican perspective for the first time during the debate was ugly. The conservative party has their talking points about GENDA, and it has to do with locker rooms and bathrooms, and the idea that sexual predators will now be dressing up as women and getting access to women-only spaces

CM: How does it feel to hear these things?

MS: Simple - more work. More work is all. Hell, they are lawmakers, and they are entitled to their opinion. They just need more education. We need more voices, more faces, more education. But our friends were great - Danny O'Donnell, Deborah Glick, Dick Gottfried, and Brooklyn's Jim Brennan, they were all great.

CM: Tell me about the pain of the last Congressional session's debate about ENDA.

MS: We had spent years... how do I put this? In the Bush agenda there is no room for trans rights or LGBT rights. They worked very hard to de-gay their legislation. All the work of the Clinton administration, they worked hard to remove. Only since 2006, since the Dems took over Congress, have new ideas come into play. I started lobbying federally in the Clinton years and stopped in the Bush years. It didn't seem to make sense.

CM: Are you saying you weren't surprised by what happened to ENDA?

MS: As recently as 2002 we were trying to get the language of ENDA changed to be trans-inclusive. It finally had a chance when the Human Rights Campaign changed their mind in 2004. After the fiasco here in New York when trans-language was never included in the gay rights bills, **Matt Foreman went to bat for us, while he was running the National Gay and Lesbian Task**

Force, but then last year HRC reversed its decision.

CM: So why did the powers that be decide to exclude the trans-inclusive language?

MS: Hard to say, really. My guess is that perhaps it came from George Miller [the California Democrat who chairs the House's Committee on Education and Labor] or it's very possible that the supportive Republicans came together in conference with [Connecticut] Representative Christopher Shays and demanded a gay-only ENDA. We don't know, but the Dems didn't want a war on this. Whether it was ultimately Miller, Barney Frank, or Nancy Pelosi's strategy decision, I don't know. But HRC supported it. In any event, it would be hard to change it back now that it's gone through the House. I'm not all that optimistic.

CM: I'm struck by your dispassionate stance, how practical you are. Is that the voice of experience?

MS: My focus is the fight. I don't focus on victory. I'm in it for the fight. Our trans community is so small and virtually invisible, and for me to make demands of the culture at large where so few relate to and recognize our needs would be a waste of energy.

CM: How do you keep going?

MS: I think the fight is worth it. I like the fights. I like the ideas behind the fights.