



State of the Movement

Filed by: Guest Blogger
January 30, 2009 8:30 PM

UPDATE: Video excerpts of Rea's speech have been added at the end of the post.

Editors' Note: *Rea Carey, Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force delivered the following speech at the 21st National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change in Denver, Colo., on Jan. 30, 2009.*



I know many of us may be questioning the state of our movement, and I'll get to that in a bit, but first, I can't resist saying that we now live in a country with a community organizer in chief and since the Task Force literally has the trademark on Creating Change, we know that our moment has arrived!

I am honored to serve as the executive director of the Task Force following my friend Matt Foreman. In fact, pretty much since I came out at the age of 16 here in Denver I have watched, learned from and been inspired by the Task Force, so I consider myself to be incredibly fortunate to be part of it. I have come up through this movement and many of my teachers are here with us today, including a couple of former Task Force executive directors -- Urvashi Vaid and Lorri Jean.

You've already met Russell Roybal, and I want to call up to the stage my other new partner in running the Task Force -- a woman who you will be hearing a lot from -- our new deputy executive director, Darlene Nipper.

I want to thank each and every one of you for being here. These are incredibly tough economic times and the fact that you have spent your precious time and limited dollars to be here -- to

gather with your fellow activists and allies from across the country and others who have joined us -- speaks to your commitment to social change, to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality, and most importantly, to each other.

This gathering is the public square of the LGBT movement and our time together is made richer and more valuable because each of you is here.

Today, I'm going to talk about some of our community's accomplishments since we met a year ago in Detroit; reflect on some of what we've experienced in this last year; and talk about where we are headed.

First, let's talk about the past year. You know, there are years when our movement for full equality jumps by leaps and bounds and other years when we toil to gain every inch of ground.

This year has been a bit of both in which we made progress on the local and state level and our country elected its first person of color to the presidency! Yet our love for each other was attacked again by the majority at the ballot box; our right to marry was taken away in California; our transgender brothers and sisters were denied much needed protections; and federal policy continued to elude us under the evil empire... I mean the Bush administration.

It has been a bittersweet year, but the state of our movement is engaged!

This year, we made many gains -- gains made because of your hard work, your strategic thinking, your long hours, and your dollars funding state and local efforts. With all of the attention paid to marriage, it would be easy to miss the progress made at the local and state level that improves the lives of LGBT people. And so much of this progress has happened not on the coasts, but in the middle part of the country.

This weekend we will invite you to text to screen all the accomplishments you've had this year but I will mention just a few of the many achievements for LGBT people in 2008: Here in our host state of Colorado, Amendment 46, a Ward Connerly initiative that would have ended affirmative action in public employment, public education or public contracting was defeated.

In Arizona, voters rejected Proposition 202, which would have penalized businesses that hire undocumented workers. And in Oregon, voters rejected an English-only proposal. In three states -- California, Colorado and South Dakota -- voters considered initiatives related to reproductive freedoms. And we won in every state.

Also, here in Colorado we expanded progress by passing a law protecting LGBT people from discrimination in housing and public accommodations.

Eight localities passed and held onto nondiscrimination laws: Gainesville and Broward County, Fla.; Columbus and Oxford, Ohio; Kansas City, Mo.; Detroit, Mich; Columbia, S.C.; and Binghamton, N.Y.

We also -- with incredibly hard work -- successfully defended one of our victories from last year: a transgender rights ordinance that passed in Montgomery County, Md., where the combined efforts of the Task Force, Equality Maryland, Lambda Legal and a host of other organizations came together to defeat the referendum and prevent it from even reaching the ballot.

In the area of family recognition, Connecticut joined Massachusetts in becoming a freedom-to-marry state and then beat back efforts that would have threatened it. Those of you from Connecticut and our great partners Love Makes a Family and Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, congratulations and thank you.

We won marriage in California and over 18,000 couples are now legally married -- and we plan

on keeping them married. Even though we lost that right temporarily, our community and allies rose up in the days after the election to say, "Enough!"

We have with us today one of the founders of Join the Impact, Willow Witte, who along with her fellow organizer Amy Balliett, used the power of online organizing to fill the streets! We're proud that some of the Join the Impact crew cut their organizing teeth at Creating Change in Portland, Ore., a few years ago and are now sharing their skills with thousands across the country.

Cities and towns in many states including Wisconsin, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Florida, Ohio and Utah, established domestic partnership or similar registries in 2008. There were domestic partnership expansions in Washington state and Washington, D.C. Maryland established limited domestic partnership recognition and New York has decided to respect out-of-state same-sex marriages.

Maine had an unprecedented year of victories in 2008 culminating in an Election Day action that surpassed their wildest dreams. After waiting in line for an hour to vote, voters were waiting in line to sign pro-marriage postcards. When Equality Maine ran out of 30,000 postcards, voters signed scraps of paper, jotting their names and addresses down on anything they could find.

Building on the momentum, Equality Maine and its coalition partners recently introduced a marriage bill and they have a solid plan for winning marriage in the Legislature in 2009 and then protecting it in the inevitable referendum campaign.

And finally, this last year's accomplishments include a record 450 out elected officials serving in local, state and federal offices including Colorado's very own Jared Polis, who became the first openly gay man to run for and be elected to Congress, joining Reps. Barney Frank and Tammy Baldwin in the House.

For each and every one of you in this room who contributed to any of those victories and the many others we had, thank you!

What we continue to accomplish as a movement is electrifying. And, yet, some of this year's results were bitter -- extremely bitter -- pills to swallow.

At the outset, let me say that I tend to be a glass-half-full person, so I can't help but see this year's anti-marriage and anti-family ballot measures as deeply painful but temporary defeats that demonstrated just how far we've come. But, it isn't just my gut feeling that this is temporary, it is based on the concrete progress we have made. For example, just four years ago, we lost 13 antimarriage ballot measures by huge margins -- by an average of 67 percent, and as high as 86 percent. In California alone, the last time we faced a similar anti-marriage measure, we lost by over 20 points. This year, we lost by less than four. I know it doesn't feel like it sometimes, but this is progress.

However, this was a particularly painful year because we lost the fundamental right that we had worked so hard to secure -- the right to marry in California.

In the days and weeks after the election, so many in our community were searching for a quick answer as to why we lost in four states. My fellow activists, there is no easy answer. The days and weeks after the election were some of the most painful I've experienced in my 24 years in this movement. I know they were painful for many of you and for our colleagues around the country, particularly in California, Arizona, Florida and Arkansas. It was hard and painful enough to have lost four statewide ballot measures. But pain turned the corner into agony when we all started lashing out at each other, our allies and our would-be allies and didn't let up.

Did the other side run excellent, although lie-filled campaigns? Yes it did. Could we all have done more or done things differently that might have moved us closer to defeating the four measures?

Certainly. We at the Task Force are a particularly analytical and reflective group and we've been taking a hard look at what we could have done better to fight against these measures.

But our winning on any of the four statewide measures was always far from being a slam dunk. We need to learn what we can from this last year and we must move forward, as we have before in times far worse than this.

I want to specifically address the blaming of African-American voters for the passage of Prop. 8.

Sadly, shamefully, an incorrect statistic was put forth in the media and many people both in and outside of our community ran with it. I want to be clear -- the blaming of African-American voters was wrong, despicable and inexcusable.

The Task Force released a study with authors Ken Sherrill and Pat Egan that included actual voting data that showed that party affiliation, conservative ideology, frequent church-going and the voter's age trumped all other factors in the Proposition 8 vote -- including race. The Task Force was criticized by some for being "politically correct." It is not politically correct to conduct sound research. It is not politically correct to challenge racism.

Have we done enough as a community to deal with our own racism and to make sure that our movement is one that reflects the true diversity of LGBT people? We sure haven't. But the finger pointing and scapegoating was an affront to the many people of color and others who worked on and with the campaign and to our allied organizations.

Furthermore, it avoids the complexity of the work we still have to do to win equality. I have had enough. WE have had enough. Let us dig deep in ourselves and show others that we will not stoop to scapegoating, we will not turn our backs on our allies, and we will not give up.

There is a big difference between blaming and learning. Let us be learners so that we may be leaders.

As we look back on this year, our confidence has been shaken and our anger has been roused -- but now is the time to turn our anger into action and our action into long-lasting change. We must now refocus on regaining marriage equality in California and winning across the country. But we need to remember that these anti-marriage ballot measures are fundamentally about the larger right-wing assault on the ever-expanding diversity in the United States, our freedom to live openly and to create and define our sexuality, our selves and our families.

I urge us not look at our movement as if it is only about this last election or only about marriage equality. Let us recall that our movement for liberation and equality has created much change since the police brutality in New York and other cities gave rise to the Stonewall riots, the activism of black and Latino gay men, and the birth of the modern LGBT movement.

If we do not come together again to fight another day, we can't win our full equality. As the magnet on my grandmother's fridge says, "Fall down seven times, get up eight!"

The state of our movement is resilient and we will win!

So, where are we headed as a movement? In order to take a look at where we are headed as a movement, we must first take a look at the broader social and political context in which we work for full equality. This context has now shifted radically. The most obvious change is that for the first time in our nation's history, we have as president, a black man, Barack Obama.

Candidate Obama recognized and affirmed a grassroots hunger for change. This year saw record numbers of young people, people of color and progressive people coming out to vote and we are

now a better country for it.

This does indeed feel like a new political era for our country and our movement.

I believe the power of this historic moment is the seismic shift in this country from a culture of "I" to a culture of "We." Obama ran with a mantra of "Yes we can!" Obama didn't say, "Yes I can" or "Yes YOU can." He said, yes WE can. This mantra, of course, carries on the organizing legacy of the United Farm Workers and Dolores Huerta. This unifying WE invites each of us into the work ahead; into the reclaiming of a government that has turned its back on so many; into challenging the long held beliefs and practices of who holds power; how power is used; and who benefits from the use of power.

Obama's "WE" challenges the culture of "I" that has been so core to this country's identity -- the image of rugged individualism, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. This imagery has been bolstered and perpetuated by scenes like Ronald Reagan riding his horse and by George Bush clearing brush on his ranch. This iconic imagery is finally being challenged. We are now off the ranch and have moved back into the WE of urban energy and creativity, the WE of close family ties and community in rural areas, the WE that has been at the center of the farm workers, civil rights, feminist and labor movements.

We are only just beginning to see the manifestations, the benefits of this cultural shift. And, our community -- the LGBT community -- is expert at showing the nation just what is possible when WE come together. This historic moment plays to our strengths.

After all, our community built an entire infrastructure of service and support for people with HIV when our own president did not have the decency to speak the syndrome's name. Our community overturned sodomy laws in a nation that possesses an intense fear of sexuality.

And our community put gender identity legislation and family protections on the political map.

WE have much to offer this country.

So, now it is our time to contribute again -- to express moral leadership and creative fortitude. It is our time to hold steady as we are attacked at the ballot box and on the streets. To hold steady as we share our talents and ideas and are pushed back. To hold steady as we assert how we create family.

The state of our movement is expansive.

In fact, the success of our aspirations will only be limited by the expansiveness of our vision and the assertion of what is in our hearts. There are a few things we must do to make the most of this moment in history and to navigate the waters of this new era. First, this moment calls for a new kind of leadership in the LGBT movement -- not the leadership of one, but the collaborative leadership of many. Don't get me wrong, the Task Force and I will assert leadership -- but at the Task Force, we believe that strength comes not from hoarding power but by building power and sharing power and using power for good. It is why so much of our work is done through coalitions or convenings like Creating Change.

We are leaders in what is good and right and just in this country.

When we insist that LGBT people be involved in the policy conversations about the economy, about health benefits, about tax policy, about immigration -- as we have been doing with the Obama transition team and administration -- we assert our community's moral leadership.

When we win marriage equality in Maine, Iowa, New Jersey and other states -- and we will -- we assert our community's moral leadership.

When we pass a gender identity-inclusive ENDA -- and we will -- we assert our community's moral leadership.

When we continue to work to get rid of useless abstinence only education, we assert our community's moral leadership.

When we stand shoulder to shoulder with our friends in labor and women's groups as the Task Force did yesterday morning at the White House for the signing of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act -- we assert our community's moral leadership.

When we promote, sustain and maintain people of color leaders -- we assert our community's moral leadership.

The second thing we must do is to think differently about who our playmates are. I was a Girl Scout when I was growing up and there was this song "make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other's gold."

We will certainly keep our LGBT organizational friends. But, it is time for us to make new, substantive and strategic friendships with non-LGBT organizations with which we share common concerns. The time for isolating ourselves as a movement is over. We will never win on our own.

So, in the coming years, you will see the Task Force partnering with some perhaps surprising organizations. We will ask them to show up for us and we will show up for them, as we have in our work with AARP on national policy and with Planned Parenthood and NAACP on ballot measures.

Third, so many of our straight friends and family are with us and we must find ways for them to make a difference in our pursuit of equality. They are near and dear to us. They're willing to work with us; they're wanting to work with us; they're waiting to work with us. Among the most striking experiences for me in the last year have been my conversations with straight people across the country, not the least of which was with my own 92-year-old grandmother who has been my cheerleader and was crushed when she was not able to make it to our wedding.

Next week the Task Force will be a partner in launching a new campaign called, "Tell 3" headed up by the ACLU and Join the Impact, along with other organizations. This campaign is simply about talking to the people in our lives about issues that matter to us as LGBT people.

We ask each and every one of you to go to our Web site next week and take part in what could be -- with your help -- the most massive friends and family education effort ever launched. If every one at Creating Change has meaningful, real conversations with three people about our lives, about the things we care about, we will have made progress in changing the hearts and minds of thousands of people -- people who will be voting on our rights next year and the years after that.

Finally, organize, organize, organize -- however you do it, walking door to door, talking to friends, going to meetings, sending tweets -- I just did -- connecting on Facebook or MySpace, or getting people elected. Just organize!

For 35 years, the Task Force has been the home for people like you, like me, like hundreds of thousands of people across this country who know that we are part of a larger community of people reaching for full equality.

As you experience the Creating Change conference, you can't help but see and hear and feel and know in your heart that the state of our movement is engaged, it is resilient, it is expansive and expanding, and it is stronger and more inspirational than ever before! With all of us together...

We will win complete equality!
We will protect and defend our families!
We will change our communities and
We will transform society!
Thank you.

The videos can be seen here:

http://www.bilerico.com/2009/01/state_of_the_movement.php.