

## The Wockner Wire

by Rex Wockner



### Interview with [Matt Foreman](#)

Here starts an occasional series in which we pick the brains of well-known homosexuals I've encountered during my 20 years in gay journalism. We start with National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman.

**REX:** Matt, is the gay glass half full or half empty in America today? Are we winning or losing? Here's an interesting quote from *Queer As Folk's* Peter Paige (Emmett), which he made to the St. Louis gay newspaper *The Vital Voice* in mid-May: "I think we've already won. And that's a hard thing to remember because it's really a scary time. But when you look at what has happened in the gay-rights movement in the last 36-37 years, we have progressed further, in a shorter period of time, than any civil-rights movement in the history of the planet, and there's bound to be a backlash. ... Uppity people get uppity and get excited and get organized and there's a backlash. But I truly believe that we have so profoundly impacted the generation behind us that we've already won. We just don't know it yet." I think I agree with Peter.

**MATT:** The question is not whether we are going to win complete equality, but when? Yes, in many ways we have 'won' the cultural war, which is the essential predicate to winning legal equality. This is underscored by polls showing 75-percent-plus believe we will eventually win marriage equality, and by strong support among younger people. Yes, amazing progress in a very short period of time. All of this is of little consequence, however, in the day-to-day lives of our people. Job, housing and public-accommodation discrimination is rampant. FBI statistics show that more people are being murdered because of their sexual orientation than for any other bias reason. Our young people are still routinely bullied and beaten in schools. The examples of egregious injustices in the area of partner and family recognition are too many to list. I could go on and on. The glass is filling up, but not nearly quickly enough.

**REX:** Would you say there are stark regional discrepancies in the amount of antigay bias and discrimination that out people face? I live in San Diego where city, county and state law all three protect gays from discrimination. We've certainly had no antigay murders in the 12 years I've lived here. State law lets gay couples register as domestic partners and grants them every state-level right of marriage -- and recognizes their families. I'm sure people in Massachusetts and Vermont and some other places live in a similar environment. Are there two Americas, or three or four, when it comes to things gay?

**MATT:** There are many Americas for LGBT people -- depending on the overlays of race, class, gender identity, gender and geography. The reach of pro-LGBT laws in a given jurisdiction is an indicator of community attitudes. But, those attitudes vary widely within short distances. In New York City, for example, it's much easier being out in Chelsea than Bensonhurst. But, other factors -- such as race and class -- have a much greater impact than geography. Money and race usually dictate where you can live or where you are educated, which is a principle indicator of lifetime income. Money can buy insulation from the more overt aspects of antigay discrimination, but has less power in escaping from racism and sexism.

**REX:** That makes it sound like we can't achieve GLBT equality until every other social ill in America is eradicated also. I think I disagree. There's still racism and sexism in Massachusetts, but same-sex couples in Massachusetts, of all races and genders, have achieved full legal equality, including access to plain old marriage. Can there be no GLTB equality without full success of The Thousand Year Plan for Peace and Harmony in the Universe?

**MATT:** You asked if there were different gay Americas, and that's what I addressed. It's very important not to fall into the stereotype that we all live in a Will & Grace world. Of course it's possible to win equal rights under the law without overcoming other social ills. African American leaders have talked a lot about the fact that all laws upholding racial discrimination have been eliminated for many years, but the economic gap between whites and blacks -- and many other measurements of discrimination -- have not narrowed since Brown vs. Board of Education. So, unless we also deal some crushing blows to heterosexism and the other isms that afflict our society along the way, the win will be illusory for broad swaths of our community.

**REX:** That's one particular take on gay lib -- and one that NGLTF is well-known for. Moving on... What are the chances that all these state antimarriage constitutional amendments eventually will be found by the U.S. Supreme Court to violate the U.S. Constitution. Is that something we can realistically hope for?

**MATT:** Yes, absolutely. If a case was to come before the current Supreme Court, I think the chances are very high the state amendments would be struck down under the Equal Protection Clause. By the time a case gets there, however, it's likely there will be two or three resignations. This is what makes the next appointments to the Supreme Court so critical -- not only for us, but for so many other human-justice issues.

**REX:** Then shouldn't we be trying our damndest to get a case there immediately? And, are we? And a third question: Is the proposed federal ban on same-sex marriage still languishing, or has it managed to pick up any steam?

**MATT:** The legal groups are moving forward on many cases, but there's no way to rush the process. And, it's critical that we get the case with the best possible facts before the court. That was immensely important in the Lawrence v. Texas outcome [that struck down all remaining U.S. sodomy laws]. The Federal Marriage Amendment -- as now written -- has no chance in the Senate, thanks to the solidarity of the Democratic caucus.

**REX:** What else is NGLTF heavily focused on this year? Where can a group such as yours make the biggest dent with the resources it has available? A lot of people are freaked out about the marriage backlash and are feeling under siege. Where lies hope?

**MATT:** Our community is under siege and there's no sugarcoating that fact. The only option is to stand up to the evil bullies and fight. We cannot win unless we demand that decent people come to our aid -- just as they would if the fundamental rights of another minority were being threatened. We will be focusing our resources in California, Massachusetts, and other states facing amendments, and on building grassroots political strength for the long term.

**REX:** Who are the decent people, or organizations, that aren't coming to our aid in the way that they should be? Are there particular disappointments?

**MATT:** The list is almost endless. Leaders who say, and probably believe, they oppose discrimination against gay people -- including mainline Protestant church leaders, corporation heads, celebrities, and 99 percent of our 'friends' in elected office -- have been bizarrely stunned into silence by the word 'marriage.' This goes right to the heart as to how we are seen as human beings: Either we're fully equal or we're not -- it's that simple.

**REX:** Agreed. It seems the courts are our best bet. As same-sex marriage becomes legal in state after state, people in those states, as in Massachusetts now, will realize it wasn't a big deal after all, yes? Well, the courts, and plain old being out to the people we encounter in our daily lives. That's perhaps our most potent piece of ammunition in this war, right?

**MATT:** Yes and no. Time is our ultimate weapon. The challenge is to have the political strength to beat back statewide initiatives seeking to repeal our judicial and legislative wins -- something we have not been able to do so far. Being out is critical, but each of us has to insist that those we know fight for us. But, ultimately, we need to shift the paradigm and get off the notion that it's our obligation to 'educate' others that we're actually people too. Discrimination is immoral. Period.

**REX:** The statewide initiatives are the voting population of the state depriving us of marriage and, in some case, even domestic-partnership rights and recognition. I'm not sure political strength would help with that, nor would having the NAACP making a big progay stink help with that. This comes down to each individual voter. ... Convince me that gays themselves don't share the blame for this current state of affairs by refusing to live their lives openly and honestly.

**MATT:** Throughout our nation's history, the victims of bigotry and hate -- Catholics, Jews, African-Americans, Native Americans, women, you name it -- and now, LGBT people -- have been blamed for their own victimization. This has always been -- and will always be -- insulting nonsense. While racism and intolerance based on another's religion are alive and well, for example, there is broad societal consensus that they are wrong. In the wake of 9/11, for example, anyone who said that the rise in anti-Muslim violence was because Muslims had failed to 'educate' their neighbors about their lives would have been ridiculed. But, it's OK to say that about us? I don't think so.

I also have a real problem with lecturing people about coming out. This coming from the organization that is known as the home for those who can't pass and wouldn't if they could. For tens of thousands, coming out still means losing your job, your promotion, your home, your children and/or putting yourself in physical danger.

You are right that it comes down to the way individuals vote -- setting aside, for the moment, the gross immorality of putting fundamental human rights up for a popular vote. People's votes are significantly influenced by societal norms about what is right and wrong. That's why we need nongay leaders -- political, social and religious -- to say clearly and unambiguously that discrimination against gay people and the political attacks being mounted against us are wrong and immoral.

**REX:** Well, you've come back to that point repeatedly. Final question, then: How do you get politicians, celebrities, opinion makers and leaders in various spheres to embrace marriage for same-sex couples? None of them seems to be particularly in a mood to lead rather than follow at this point in time. What can NGLTF do, and what can my readers do, to get these folks to step up to the plate?

**MATT:** The only way to get leaders to step up to the plate is to ask and insist. People always respond better to people they know, so I implore people who have relationships with elected officials, major and minor celebrities, civic leaders and clergy members to make personal appeals, from the heart. Freedom to Marry's site has a list of prominent marriage supporters that is helpful (see [http://www.freedomtomarry.org/marriage\\_resolution.asp](http://www.freedomtomarry.org/marriage_resolution.asp)). Over the coming year, the Task Force will be focusing on faith leaders, using the National Religious Leadership Roundtable and welcoming and affirming congregations. Winning is more than possible.

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