



## **“Put Politics Back Into Pride”**

**Speech given by Matt Foreman, Executive Director**

**National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**

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Thank you very much. It's a tremendous honor to be invited to be with you here today, people who give over their lives to commemorate and celebrate the spirit of Stonewall year after year.

I think some of what I'm going to say might be a little provocative or sound a little judgmental, so I'd like to start by saying my thoughts are based on my being a pride zealot too, someone who's drank the pride juice and never been able to get off the sauce.

In other words, I don't feel like an outside commentator, but a colleague who – for better or worse – shares the same commitment or mental illness – you choose the terminology – as each of you.

I got hooked in 1984 in the last gasps of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee in New York, when, six weeks out we learned that we had less than \$40 in the bank and that our coordinator had been pilfering money not only from us but from the Softball League and the Bowling League. Nonetheless, we pulled the parade and rally off on a literal shoestring, including illegally tapping into a streetlamp to provide power for the pride rally, since we certainly couldn't afford a generator.

My first pride coordinators conference was in Ft. Lauderdale in 1985 and what I remember most was that going into the final round of voting on the annual national theme, the leading candidate was “Our Pride is Growing and Showing.” I'm glad the group came to its

senses at the last minute – after objections from lesbians (duh) – and adopted “Alive with Pride in ‘85” which we in New York promptly rejected in favor of “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet.”

I know we chose “Alive with Pride” because it seemed like everything was crashing around us – Reagan was ensconced for a second term in the White House, and most tragically, our friends and lovers were dying all around us, there were no effective treatments, the so-called Christian Conservatives were ascendant with their message that AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality – a message so many of us readily internalized – government didn’t give a damn, and contrary to the premise of Randy Shilts’ book, the band was not playing on – instead, it seemed like the music had stopped and gay and pride were in danger of never being linked again.

Incredibly, it never crossed our minds that “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet!” could be interpreted as anything other than a bold statement of defiant optimism. Little did we know then that AIDS deaths would mount for 10 more years, that public support for us would plummet, that homophobic violence would continue to spiral upwards, that anti-LGBT policies would become even further entrenched for more than two more decades, and that progress on basic nondiscrimination protections at the federal level would flame out for just as long.

But, at that moment in our community’s history, both “Alive with Pride” and “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet!” hit precisely the right message. All across the country, tens and tens of thousands turned out for pride celebrations, just as they had for the prior 15 years, wheelchairs and oxygen tanks as needed, alive with pride at that very moment though many knew or believed it would be their last year on earth.

Then and now this is the essential and central element of pride – it is the one and only day in the year when every part of our community is welcome and turns out to be – to be outrageous or outraged, hyper-butch or absurdly girly, spectacularly attired or plainly boring. The one day of the year that is ours, where streets are ours and the parks are ours. The one day when we can “flaunt” who we are with at least some sense of safety. And, perhaps most significantly, the one day of the year when class doesn’t matter.

I know each of you here today holds in your heart those wonderful pride moments. Seeing someone step tentatively and fearfully off the curb and then being filled with obvious joy.

Seeing our old and our young coming together or walking heads held high past the obligatory group of bigots. Girls and boys, buff and unbuff dancing together with wide smiles. Straight people initially shocked or befuddled and then cheering and clapping. And, I hope each one of you – in spite of your exhaustion or frustration – still feels that one moment on pride day when you looked around and said to yourself, “Wow, I helped make *this* happen.”

Today, to you, the keepers of the flame of Stonewall, I'd like to encourage two things – one, what I believe is the urgent need to re-politicize pride, and two, the need to resist and rebel against the ever-present pressures to “sanitize” our community's celebrations.

First, I'd like to suggest that some prides have lost sight not only of Stonewall, but of the unique opportunity pride presents to educate our people not only about our accomplishments, but about the challenges that remain.

I've been to prides where there have been at least 15 drag performances – and not that I don't like drag – but not one speaker talking about equal rights. I've been to many others where folks are exhorted to be proud, but never told why.

The explanations I've received are always along the same lines. “We don't get involved in politics.” “People are just here for fun and don't care about the past.” Or, “we don't want to jeopardize our tax exempt status.”

Fun and political punch are not mutually exclusive. But more to the point, not using this unique opportunity to reach those who are not otherwise involved in our movement and talk about how we got to where we are today and about the real issues our people face not only insults all those who have sacrificed to get us this far but calls into question why should pride continue.

Frankly, to me prides that overwhelmingly focus on individual people taking pride in their own gayness ring hollow and leave all of us open to attacks that we are one-dimensional and self-absorbed. Rather, over and above encouraging people to take pride in themselves, I think it is up to you as leaders to make it equally clear that everyone should take pride in and celebrate all that we have accomplished since Stonewall – everything from nondiscrimination protections to partner recognition to unprecedented shifts in public opinion. And all of this is even more

remarkable, even a greater reason to take pride, because it's happened in spite of hundreds of years of prejudice injected into every fiber of society's DNA, against huge odds and mighty opponents, with meager resources, with a plague that killed a generation of our men.

Contrary to so many assumptions, I find young people everywhere are hungry for knowledge about our past and bowled over by what's been accomplished.

Along with using prides to consistently remember our past, it is equally important to address the continuing challenges we face. Shying away from these issues or papering over them is a huge disservice and perpetuates the "Will & Grace" myth in both LGBT and straight worlds – namely, the perception that we are on top of the world or nearly so, while the legal reality is quite the opposite.

We, you, cannot let the discomfort of some in our community allow us to be silent about the ugly facts about discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Young LGBT people are still at least three times more likely to attempt and commit suicide.

Up to 40% of homeless youth in this country are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender thrown out of their homes simply because of who they are. Yet, there is not a single federal funding stream to address this problem.

The only category in which HIV transmission is increasing is in men sleeping with men, and rates of HIV infection among young gay and bi African American men have reached immoral levels. Yet, our government has slashed HIV prevention programs aimed at our community while showering tens of millions on "abstinence only" programs which not only have been shown definitively not to work, but to actually increase unsafe sex among young people who participate in these programs.

Survey after survey shows widespread anti-gay discrimination in employment, with between two-thirds and three-quarters of us hiding our sexual orientation on the job or on the street for fear of discrimination or violence. Yet, discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations and credit is perfectly legal in 33 states and in 41 states if you are

transgender, and that of course includes many states represented here including North Dakota, Ohio, Michigan, and Texas.

According to the FBI – whose own statistics notoriously undercount anti-gay hate crimes – in 2004, anti-LGB crime (they don't track anti-transgender violence) was the second highest category of hate crime – it was third in 2005. That means that in proportion to the US population, lesbian, gay and bisexual people are more likely to be the victim of a hate crime than any other minority. The brutal murder of Andrew Anthos right here in Detroit is just one horrible example of this continuing epidemic. Yet – for 17 years – federal legislators have refused to add sexual orientation or gender identity to existing hate crimes laws and the anti-gay industry says these things don't even happen.

And, of course, the examples of injustices in the area of partner and family recognition are too many to list – from grossly disparate taxation to from partners of 20 or 30 years being denied pension or line of duty death benefits to the unending stories of someone not being able to say goodbye to his or her partner of 40 or 50 years in a hospital Intensive Care Unit because they're not "family."

And beyond the absence of affirmative protections, we are still in the midst of an unprecedented national campaign to strip us of fundamental rights. Eleven years ago, no state specifically prohibited the recognition of same sex marriage. As of today, 41 states have done so including voters in 27 states approving state constitutions to prohibit the recognition of same sex marriage and with most of them the recognition of any form of relationship between persons of the same gender, including domestic partnerships and civil unions. Nothing on this scale has occurred in the history since the ratification of U.S. constitution.

Webster's defines discrimination as "unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice." Clearly, LGBT people are targets, victims – or whatever word you choose – of discrimination and we, you, cannot ever be afraid to put that on the table and insist that it be addressed.

Along with a reluctance to talk about the discrimination we face, I also see a near universal reluctance to name our enemies during pride celebrations. The thinking seems to be

we should ignore them, just as we encourage marchers to ignore them as we pass by their hateful signs, and that by talking about them we empower them.

While I agree with ignoring them on the march route (because nothing bothers them more), I think it's critical to remind those who attend prides that there's a reason why we lack rights and are under attack. That's because an entire industry has been built around demonizing, defaming and dehumanizing gay people. We cannot, we should not pretend that their organizing and their preaching vanishes into the ether, with no consequence. Instead, I encourage each of you when you speak to the media or when you choose your speakers not to minimize or ignore the bigots in your midst. Highlight them and their appalling signs and ranting. Connect them to the real hurt they cause our people and insist that people of good will condemn them with the same vehemence as if they were attacking another minority.

I don't mean to suggest that this all needs to be a downer or negative for negative's sake. You can have a ton of fun with our opponents – What about Ted Haggard getting “meth and a massage” from a male sex worker? What about Ann Coulter calling John Edwards a “faggot” while simultaneously lavishing praise on a gay porn star with 11 famous inches? What about Newt Gingrich saying his adultery is better than Bill Clinton's and James Dobson giving him sympathy? Our opponents keep serving up a veritable feast for pointing out hypocrisy and I say dig in.

Similarly, for every problem facing our community, there are proven, positive remedies and pride celebrations are a critical opportunity to push them – whether it's state, local or federal nondiscrimination legislation, domestic partner recognition, or anti-bullying laws and programs. I urge you to take the risk and take the plunge and pick one proactive remedy to address each year and do your level best to reach every single person attending pride on that issue.

This means stepping away from the philosophy of so many pride organizations that they exist essentially to provide a blank canvass every year for participating organizations to paint on. I not only think this is the right thing to do, I think it's essential for pride organizations to stay relevant and be seen as responsible community leaders.

Believe me, I know this will be hard because there are so many competing issues deserving attention. I know it requires wading into to sometimes rocky intra-community politics. I know it requires a lot of dialogue and a lot of communication. But, I really do believe pride leaders have an obligation to lead on the critical issues of the day and are uniquely suited to rally, unify and focus your community.

Let me be clear, this will not jeopardize your 501(c)(3) tax status and those who say that frankly don't know what they're talking about or are looking for excuses.

The final point I want to make today is my belief that you, as pride leaders, need to embrace and lift up the diversity of our community and very directly resist and repel those who disparage or seek to suppress those they view as hurting our community's image.

Everywhere I go I hear people say we'd be so much further along in everything, including marriage, if we could hide away the "fringe" folks. If only they went away, if only we didn't have those images in pride parades of leather people, dykes on bikes, dancing boys in skimpy shorts, or outrageous drag queens, everything would be so much better. I hear Pride organizers everywhere deplore the fact that the media always ignores the vast majority of participants in favor of these B roll clips.

There are many responses to this, starting with the simple but sad fact that most of us are pretty boring and boring images do not make good television.

And, no doubt there is homophobia in the way in which the media covers our events. Straight people do much more out there, much more salacious things – indeed, much more ridiculous things - in their rituals than we even contemplate – including the bacchanalia surrounding the Super Bowl, Mardi Gras, or even the annual conventions of fraternal orders and many corporations. But that's all just good, clean fun, letting off steam. But us – we're over the top.

We can't control that. But more importantly we must not try to whitewash and sanitize our lives or our people to make us more acceptable to straight people. For one thing, it doesn't

matter what kind of face we try to put forward at pride, or how neatly we keep our lawns or how much we try emulate straight society. Our opponents don't care whether you're a good gay or a bad gay – they hate us because of who we have sex with, pure and simple. And they certainly don't care if the sex they think we're having is vanilla or kinky. It's all the same to them.

I deal with these people a lot and they really believe all we do is have wild and crazy sex all the time – boy, don't you wish – and I'm convinced that a lot of what fuels their obsession with homosexuality is jealousy.

Our truth is that we are a wonderful and diverse people – religious people, butch dykes, leathermen, bi people, trans people, funky people, kinky people. Pretending that we're not or trying to hide it away is disingenuous and dishonest.

Our truth is that we create and sustain families through choice, not missionary position obligation. Our truth is that sex and sexuality are still central to us and that's not only good – it is great and it is sacred – and celebrating that at pride is essential to maintaining our identify as a people.

The truth is that the vision of Stonewall demands that we be proud of and fight for every part of our community. No apologies. No retreat.

In closing, let me say that I know how hard it is to be a pride leader – in a big city or a small town, it doesn't matter. I know how hard you work *all* year so that so many others can have a great day of pride. I know your work is mentally taxing and physically exhausting. I know the bullshit that you have to put up with internally, with other community groups, with vendors, and so often with city officials and the police.

But I also know that each one of you knows how important, how fundamental pride celebrations are to our communities. The difference they make, the potential they have. On your shoulders is this precious tradition and burden. I thank you for taking it up. I thank you for keeping Stonewall alive, and I urge you to infuse these unique occasions with new political energy and a renewed commitment to liberation.

Thank you.