



October 18, 2006

Capital District (N.Y.) Speech

By Matt Foreman, Executive Director, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

I cannot begin to tell you what an honor it is for me to be invited to speak here tonight and to be back in Albany. In the spirit of the Capital District Gay and Lesbian Community Council, I'd like to talk about three things — pride, anger and New York and its importance to our national community.

Let's start by taking real pride in our community's extraordinary progress over the last 37 years. Simply put: no other social justice movement in the history of the world has made as much progress as we have.

Thirty-seven years ago, the terms sexual orientation and gender identity were largely unknown and there were no laws anywhere protecting gay people from discrimination. Today, 49.9 percent of the nation's population lives in jurisdictions that protect gay people from discrimination and 31 percent live in jurisdictions that protect transgender people.

Thirty-seven years ago, any form of family recognition for our people was unthinkable. Today, over half of Fortune 500 companies offer domestic partner benefits, marriage equality is at the epicenter of national discourse, and the leading candidate for governor of New York is firmly pro-marriage.

Even 30 years ago, who would have dreamed that we would have such a wonderful and vibrant community right here in Albany, with its own community center and the capacity to pull off a great event like this.

And how did this all of this happen? I can assure you that it wasn't legislators waking up one day and saying, "Geez, let's do something good for the gays."

No — all of this is the fruit of the work of the people in this room — pushing, prodding, donating, envelope-licking. It's been your electing pro-LGBT and gay and lesbian people to office.

What I'm saying is that 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, we — and that certainly means everyone in this room — have accomplished all of this in less than 40 years — a mere blip in human history.

There is, of course, much more to do, and while we can bask with pride, I believe we are going to need something over the next few years to carry us forward and that is anger.

Angry at the way in which an entire industry has been built around demonizing, defaming and dehumanizing gay people.

Angry that we now live in a nation where “Rev.” Pat Robertson, and Dr. James Dobson, not scientists, are allowed to be the leading experts on everything from stem-cell research to HIV prevention.

Angry that we now live in a nation where lying about a blow job is an impeachable offense, but lying that leads to the literal blowing up of thousands of human bodies is not.

And, today, in this moment in time, anger at the profound, appalling and disgusting homophobia that has surrounded everything about the Foley scandal. The leadership of the Republican Party has only one response when it’s in trouble: “Blame the Gays.”

First, they floated the excuse that past complaints about Foley weren’t pursued because Republicans didn’t want to look like they were “gay bashing.” Coming from these people who have made a living on doing just that, cut me a break. Then, they dispatched henchmen like Tony Perkins and Pat Buchanan to offer the blood libel that gay men are prone to pedophilia. Now they are adding the poison that a shadowy network of closeted gay Republicans closed ranks to protect Foley, and of course, have been sabotaging the conservative agenda for years.

I know many people in this room — including myself — are enjoying watching the Denny Hastert and others twist and turn and burn, and believe and hope that this will bring them down, at long last. But, mark my words, they haven’t finished — not by a long shot — trying to tie all of us to this mess. And we have to demand that elected officials, talk-show hosts and our allies denounce this for what it is, appalling gay-baiting, McCarthyism at its worst.

But this about much more than ugly rhetoric and wedge politics. We can never forget that all of this is about hurting people — our people — in real ways. It causes high rates of suicide and homelessness among young LGBT people.

It causes rampant discrimination in employment, hate-fueled violence that just days ago killed Michael Sandy in Brooklyn. And the daily, heartbreaking injustices our families face almost everywhere because they are denied legal recognition and protection.

I don't know about you, but all of this immorality makes me sick, and it makes angry, very angry. I believe we can and must hold this anger in our hearts to spur us on — because, as Coretta Scott King said — you cannot fight for justice unless you are angry about injustice.

That brings me to my third point — New York, and how desperately your brothers and sisters across the state and around the country need to see real progress on equal rights coming out of the Capitol right here in Albany.

Let me be blunt — as someone who’s lived in the state for 30 years — I am embarrassed by the state of gay rights in New York. It’s a disgrace that that Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, California and New Jersey are light years ahead of us. Look at California — there’s been a literal torrent of pro-LGBT laws enacted over the last three years. Here, a trickle.

Let’s be clear here. This sorry state of affairs is not for lack of hard work or effective lobbying — I see so many familiar faces here who have been trudging up and done the halls of the LOB for years. The Empire State Pride Agenda, my former employer, does a spectacular job working the

Assembly, the Senate and the governor. Alan Van Capelle, Carmen Vasquez and Ross Levi are the best and the brightest our movement has, anywhere.

No, the blame for our sorry state of affairs rests squarely on the dysfunctional way our state government works, the way it keeps everyone in their “appropriate” places, and the fact that the people of New York — and that includes each of us in this room as well as the members of the majorities in both house of the Legislature — have enabled this morass to last so long.

I will bet that nearly everyone here tonight knows exactly what I’m talking about. You either play with the system, or it freezes you out completely. You say something out of line in the press and you — meaning your entire constituency and cause — gets punished. You have to work with all sides to get anything accomplished, but if you say something too nice about anyone else, warning sirens go off. Above all, don’t push too hard, don’t demand too much, remember your place.

But let me take this one step further. I get that everyone in the Albany system can point to each other and blame the other — the Democrats in the Assembly, the Republicans in the Senate, and/or the governor for standing in the way. But that does not explain the lack of progress in the Assembly.

Look, I’m a Democrat, but I’m not about to begin blaming Joe Bruno and the Republican/Conservatives for blocking our agenda when my own party — whose platform explicitly supports equality for our people — isn’t teeing that agenda up and pushing it through the entire session.

Here, the Democrats have a 61-seat majority in the Assembly, which is likely to grow in November. That means on any given vote, they could let off 28 of their own members and still pass legislation without the support of a single Republican.

Where is the vote on GENDA, the gender identity nondiscrimination act. As I recall in the final, painful days of the SONDA struggle, we were told the Assembly would have no problem extending protections to transgender people.

How come, when the legislatures of all of our border states except for Pennsylvania, have vigorously debated marriage and civil unions, we haven’t even had a committee hearing on either? How come three out of the four pro-gay bills passed in the last session came in the final days of the session, effectively precluding any meaningful negotiations with the other parties? We’re going to have a new governor in January and the first real chance in years and years to break out of this sad place we’ve been in.

What’s it going to take? It’s going to take holding Eliot Spitzer to his principled commitment to supporting marriage equality. It’s going to take each one of us breaking out of our mindsets and knee-jerk way of shrugging our shoulders, letting our elected officials off the hook and rationalizing “this is the way Albany is.” And, it’s going to take each one of you in this room raising hell for equality in the coming session, and the next, and the next. It means each one of you in this room being at the Pride Agenda’s equality day next May 1.

I ask each of you to be on a daily mission to talk to your family, your friends, your neighbors and your co-workers and ask them for their help in pushing equality here in New York.

The one thing I know is that with talent, the commitment, the anger and the pride of the people here tonight, we can and we will not only break through — we can do it in less than four years. Let's do it.

Thank you.