



## After ENDA, the Fighter's Resilient

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Seated before a crowd of roughly 50 at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center, Mara Keisling opened with a joke.

"I had a not-so-friendly experience a couple of weeks ago. I went to an ex-gay conference," said the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE). "I thought it was an ex-guy conference." If a drummer's rim shot had followed that punch line, she would have sounded like a Las Vegas comedy act from the '60s.

Keisling, 48, kept up the humor during the two-hour event on March 5 as she talked about NCTE's work, the state of the movement - the entire LGBT movement - and the 2007 efforts to pass the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act in the US House with protections for transgendered people stripped out.

In contrast to a defiant February 23 speech in Manhattan by Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, in which he defended that lobbying group's support for ENDA and charged that other LGBT groups had abandoned the fight, Keisling gave HRC and the House Democratic leadership their due. She commended HRC and Congressman Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat and ENDA champion, for advancing transgender issues. Last fall, Frank was widely criticized for "throwing trans people under the bus."

"Congressman Frank really, really wants to protect transgendered people," Keisling said.

Of course, Keisling is in a privileged position. **Working with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, NCTE was able to build United ENDA, a coalition of 370 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups that opposed removing transgender protections from the bill.**

"It was the entire movement against HRC," Keisling said. ENDA passed the House last year, but is given little chance in the Senate, with fears of a looming Republican filibuster.

The fight thrust NCTE to the fore in the community. The four-year-old group, with just four staff people, was already a leading voice for transgendered people on Capitol Hill. Post-ENDA, its profile has grown. NCTE began with Keisling attending the occasional meeting in the nation's capital when transgender representation was needed.

"My activism started getting in the way of my job," said Keisling who was a consultant at the time. "Then my job started getting in the way of my activism."

Keisling said she was uniquely qualified to become NCTE's first executive director. "I had the number one qualification, I was available," she said.

NCTE has focused on five areas.

The group is concerned with protecting the privacy of transgendered people, but also ensuring they get accurate government identification, a task that has become more complicated with the federal government setting national standards for federal and state issued IDs.

"It is almost impossible for a trans man to get a passport. It is getting harder for trans women," Keisling said.

NCTE is fighting to ensure access to health insurance for transgendered men and women; it acts as a clearinghouse for information on the transgender community; NCTE wants to create a "federal transgender agenda;" and, ENDA aside, the group deals with the relatively small amount of federal legislation that affects the transgender community.

The intra-community battle over ENDA has paid benefits beyond building United ENDA, Keisling said.

There will be hearings in the House this spring on discrimination against transgendered Americans and NCTE has presented a list of 70 potential witnesses for that event. That will come on top of the heightened profile of transgendered Americans in the wake of the ENDA fight.

"There is not a member of Congress who doesn't know what gender identity is anymore," Keisling said. Still, she is not naïve about the status that gay and transgender issues have on Capitol Hill.

"With a lot of these folks, these are not front and center for them," Keisling said. "Some are still afraid of the gay thing."

Next year though, the Democrats would be receptive to including a ban on discrimination based on gender identity and expression, generally understood to protect transgendered people, if the votes are there, Keisling said.

"We have to show Barney Frank 220 votes," she said. "If we show him 220 votes, nobody is going to work harder on this. The same with HRC... It's going to happen again next year."