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Paterson Hailed as Staunch LGBT Supporter

LGBT activists say soon-to-be New York governor David Paterson will be a boon for LGBT rights and a healer in Albany.

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By Kerry Eleveld

Lt. Governor David Paterson, who will assume the responsibilities of governor of New York on Monday, March 17, is viewed by gay and trans activists alike as the staunchest of supporters for the LGBT community. Paterson will be the first African-American and legally blind governor of the state.

“He has been there in every critical fight over the last two decades,” said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, naming hate-crimes legislation introduced in 1987 and passed in 2000, the Sexual Orientation Nondiscrimination Act (SONDA) passed in 2002, and the ongoing fight to legalize same-sex marriage.

Though SONDA was not trans-inclusive, transgender activist Melissa Sklarz, director of New York Trans Rights Organization (NYTRO), said Paterson, who was the state senate minority leader at the time, labored to find a route for protecting trans people.

“When we tried to change the SONDA law in 2002, David Paterson was hugely supportive of us,” Sklarz said. More generally, she added that Paterson’s own personal struggles allow him to empathize with those who are sometimes considered outsiders. “He knows what it’s like to overcome adversity. He knows what it’s like when people are judged negatively at first impression,” she said.

Foreman noted the political reality of getting SONDA passed was that it took 31 years, and the bill the state Assembly advanced was not trans-inclusive. “We had many anguished meetings,” said Foreman, who was executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda at the time. “As minority leader of the senate, there was only so much [Paterson] could do. Getting SONDA through the Republican senate and signed by a Republican governor was a huge lift.”

Paterson himself counted passing SONDA and hate crimes as two of his biggest accomplishments in a 2006 interview with this reporter. Paterson, who represented Harlem in the state senate from 1987 to 2006, refused to pass the hate-crimes bill without protections for gays and lesbians.

“Writing the first hate crimes bill in the state, with an opportunity pass it in 1987, and turning my back on it because it didn’t include sexual orientation was another thing I was really proud of,”

then Sen. Paterson said in August 2006. “I knew it was the right thing to do, and it was the first big test of right versus personal enhancement where I did the right thing.”

Paterson was also an early supporter of same-sex marriage, going on record as early as 1994. According to LGBT activist and Democratic political consultant Ethan Geto, he took a critical part in lobbying for passage of Gov. Spitzer’s marriage equality bill in the New York State assembly last year.

“David – in what may have been an unprecedented act for a lieutenant governor or any executive official – worked the floor of the state assembly on the night that the vote on gay marriage was about to occur, encouraging and cajoling assembly members to support the bill,” he said.

Geto added that Paterson’s “passionate advocacy,” helped sway several swing votes and convince some assembly members that the quest for gay rights is akin to all civil rights movements. “This was in the face of certain black political leaders, clergy and elected officials expressing resentment that the gay community dared to compare its struggle with the black civil rights movement,” said Geto.

While Gov. Eliot Spitzer’s leadership on LGBT issues and his willingness to campaign as a supporter of legalizing gay marriage have moved queer issues forward in Albany, some feared that his combative style of politics over the last year might impede further progress.

Democrats are now one seat away from potentially gaining control of the Republican-led senate, which failed to bring the same-sex marriage bill to vote last year after the Democratically-led assembly passed it 85 to 61. Many LGBT activists believe that a change of power in the state senate would pave the way for marriage equality, though the vote count is not there yet.

“Given Eliot Spitzer’s low poll ratings even before this scandal brought him down,” said Geto, “David Paterson will be a more effective leader of the effort to knock out the Republican majority in the New York state senate this fall.”

Geto also believes that Paterson’s style will strike a soothing note in Albany after a rather stormy year. “David Paterson is a conciliator, a diplomat, a rare political figure who is liked and respected on both sides of the aisle,” he said, adding, “he also has a first-rate staff helmed by Charles O’Byrne, an openly gay man and one of the most effective and intelligent policy and political minds in government anywhere in the United States.”

Many people echoed Geto’s enthusiasm for working with the soon-to-be Gov. Paterson. “The agenda is a very large, complicated agenda for any governor in Albany, but David Paterson would find room for transgender issues,” said NYTRO’s Sklarz.

“David Paterson’s leadership is a story of commitment to civil liberties and human rights. He believes in equality and justice for all New Yorkers and has demonstrated this time and time again – in both words and actions,” said Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda. “We are excited to begin working with him as Governor.”