

Task Force director calls for 'broader vision' of equality

Foreman looks back on five years at helm of gay rights group

JOSHUA LYNSEN

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It's with mixed emotions that Matt Foreman looks back on his five years at the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.

The organization's outgoing executive director, who steps down Tuesday to join a San Francisco foundation, said he'd take many fond memories with him.

"I don't want to get sappy, but I just feel incredibly privileged to have been at the Task Force during what I think has been a pivotal time in our movement's history," Foreman said. "We faced many incredible and in many ways unprecedented challenges, and at the same time there has been really unprecedented progress."

But such joys are tempered, he said, by the knowledge that many straight Americans still aren't ready to stand up for the rights of their gay neighbors.

Foreman said that was never more apparent than during the fall elections of 2004 and 2006, when a combined 18 states voted to ban same-sex marriage.

"I think it speaks to how far we still have to go in having the majority of Americans look at us as fully human," he said. "The fact that there was so little moral outrage, and still so little moral outrage, really says that many people who perceive themselves to be tolerant — they like gay people — don't actually see us as human beings."

Foreman said the ballot results also showed that gays must do more to ally themselves with other movements, "because when push came to shove, we simply didn't have those relationships and mutuality that the community needs in times of crisis."

That, he said, is why the Task Force "worked in real ways with other communities" to combat referendums that sought to restrict abortion rights, curtail affirmative action laws and target undocumented immigrants.

"We continue to be criticized for doing that," Foreman said. "I really don't care about the criticism. It's who we are and we're proud of that. We're proud to take stands on things that aren't, quote unquote, gay issues."

And the continued fight for equality would go better, he said, if gay Americans realized "we can't win by ourselves" and worked, like the Task Force, for a "broader vision than equal rights on statute books."

"We see ourselves as part of a movement to really transform our country," Foreman said. "And there, again, people criticize us for that. But guess what? That's who we've always been. That's who we'll always be."

Foreman, who lives in New York City with Francisco DeLeon, his partner of 18 years, is moving to San Francisco to head the gay program division at the Evelyn & Walter Hass Jr. Fund, a foundation that supports liberal social causes.

Joe Solmonese, president of Human Rights Campaign, said in a statement that it was an honor to work with Foreman “during this oftentimes difficult struggle for equality.”

“Matt is someone whose perspective, leadership and insight into our movement have been invaluable,” he said. “In my three years at HRC, I have come to know Matt and consider him a friend. I look forward to continuing our work together on behalf of the GLBT community.”

Although he pushed the Task Force to help other movements, Foreman said the organization remains focused on gay issues.

He said his successor, who has not been named, would be charged with a host of duties, one of which is helping protect the right of same-sex couples to marry in Massachusetts.

Foreman said it was crucial that lawmakers there voted last year to kill an effort to ban such unions.

“I think it’s absolutely essential that we preserve the freedom to marry in the one state that we have it,” he said. “To have lost that beachhead would have set the national movement back years and years.”

More than 150 state legislators voted against a proposed constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. The measure needed 50 votes to advance to the 2008 ballot. It got 45.

“I don’t know to this day if most people get that we got three-fourths of the legislature to vote our way,” Foreman said. “We got 75-plus percent. The bar was so high, the fact that our unified community met it is extraordinary.”

Also important, he said, are increased efforts to combat HIV and AIDS.

Foreman said although 70 percent of people in the United States living with HIV are gay or bisexual, gay Americans and organizations are not sufficiently engaged in efforts to combat the disease.

“Our community is totally not engaged and I think a part of it is people feel, ‘What more can be done?’” he said. “People feel a certain sense of hopelessness around it.”

Foreman said a renewed commitment to fight the disease is all the more needed because “the federal government has just completely dropped the ball on basic prevention and resources and funding” at a time when infection rates are increasing.

He said gays should be demanding more work be done to develop new medicines and better understand the rising infection rates.

“No one can say with any scientific reported data what is driving these increases in HIV infection among gay and bi men,” Foreman said. “We make, frankly, racist assumptions.”

He also noted that gay organizations should partner with the federal Centers for Disease Control & Prevention to craft new and meaningful intervention plans.

“I think if more people in our community know the facts, we can and will mobilize a response,”

Foreman said. "I think that people don't know the facts and racism clouds our judgments."

Return of ENDA debate

Foreman's departure comes as gay organizations are reopening debate over the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which has stalled in Congress.

The measure, which would ban job discrimination based on sexual orientation, passed the House last year without specific protections for transgender people. That omission drew great criticism from many gay groups that, together as United ENDA, decried the gay-only bill.

Foreman said the coalition, led by the Task Force, has remained silent in recent months, but is ready to reemerge when the Senate takes up the bill.

"The fact that there isn't a daily press release should not be indicative of a lack of concrete planning and work," he said. "Most of this is local and does not need to be above the radar."

It's unclear when senators will vote on the measure, but Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) recently said the proposal would resemble the House bill and lack specific protections for transgender people.

Foreman said gays should not allow Democrats to again engage in the "wholesale retreat" from comprehensive gay civil rights that the gay-only bill represented.

He said a constituency that has been so generous to Democrats with votes and donations should demand something better in return.

"Our community, as both voters and donors, needs to play politics in a much better way," Foreman said. "Other communities do not just throw votes and money at a party and then settle for invitations to cocktail parties. They expect tangible, legislative and funding deliverables. We have just not done that at the federal level at all. Well, not at all, but well."

Knowing this, he said, the Task Force is ready to do its part on Capitol Hill.

"When I came to the Task Force, we really had a very limited presence on the Hill," Foreman said. "We now have four registered lobbyists. We have really in-depth relations with many critical offices on the Hill. All that's just going to continue and, I know, get better."

"The goal is to pass an inclusive ENDA into law in 2009," Foreman said. "And, frankly, the way we're going to get there is to do the hard work and not press releases."