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The Exit Interview

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After 18 years as one of our most visible LGBT activists, Matt Foreman has stepped down as head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Trading grassroots power for financial influence, his new role at the Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund has him allocating \$8 million in annual funding for LGBT causes. Kerry Eleveld asks him about the switch, what's in store for the movement, and where we're missing the mark.

Our interview complete, Matt Foreman sits back and says with a hint of relief, "That is the last media interview I ever have to do." Some people relish being in the spotlight and playing the PR game; others do it because they must in order to advance their cause. Foreman, one of the most genial people in the movement, has always struck me as the latter, a dedicated soldier who simply did what he had to do.

Whether or not one agrees with his stances and strategies, no rational observer could dispute that Foreman's lifework has been improving the lives of LGBT people—having served as executive director of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, Empire State Pride Agenda, and then the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. His accomplishments over the last five years at the Task Force reflect the culmination of his commitment: increasing the annual budget from \$4.7 million to \$8.5 million, more than doubling the staff to 54, and maybe most important, embodying a steadfast progressive voice. Foreman will now go the route that LGBT leaders such as Urvashi Vaid and Patrick Guerriero have gone, from being the face of the movement to assuming a behind-the-scenes role funding its work.

Where do you see the movement now, and where is it headed?

In almost every respect, the movement is stronger now than it's ever been. A lot of that has to do with more resources, particularly focused on the state and local level. That's really a new phenomenon over the last five years—that both large individual funders and foundation funders have pooled their money to try to have a more focused impact. You can look at what happened during the last legislative session, it was the best legislative session in the history of the movement. There were more relationship recognition and civil rights issues passed than ever before. Now 52% of the population lives in a jurisdiction that protects gay people from discrimination. One in five people live in a jurisdiction that offers same-sex couples very broad rights and responsibilities. We are definitely on an upward trajectory. But we still have so much work to do.

So what's next?

What we're going to see is continued, steady progress at the state level. The big question mark is what's going to happen at the federal level. What we know without a doubt is that if there will be a Democratic administration and a more Democratic Congress, there will be literally dozens of

communities and interest areas that have been in the proverbial desert with us for many years [labor, environment, choice, education], and they're all going to be clamoring for attention. I think the challenge will be, *Are we going to be able to break through that clamor?*

So why leave the Task Force now for the Haas Jr. Fund?

This is the only job I would have left the Task Force for. I honestly think it's the best job in the movement because my only focus is programming and trying to leverage dollars. I don't have to worry about administering staff. My colleagues have to worry about their institution, their staff, their IT issues, their audit—all of this stuff that comes with an organization. This is an opportunity that came along, and you just don't know when it's going to come along again. I've been an executive director for 18 years, so I'm looking forward to new challenges. Since I've been head of the Task Force, it's moved to a new level in size and budget and we've really established our voice in Washington, D.C. I think change is good. It's time for someone to take it to a whole new level.

I know you've nearly tripled the budget and doubled the staff, but how do you define success?

Money is not the measure at all. The Task Force's challenge over the last 30 years has been the tension between focusing on building the grassroots and trying to get credit for what you do. Those two things don't really go hand in hand very well. What I would count as progress here at the Task Force includes playing an essential role in preserving marriage equality in Massachusetts, defeating right-wing attempts to overturn civil rights laws or ballot initiatives in Topeka, Cincinnati, Tacoma, the state of Maine. We've given away, since I've been here, nearly \$5 million in cash to state and local organizations to help build their capacity. We have another million set to go out in next year's budget. Our policy institute has done groundbreaking research on same-sex African-American and Latino couples and the largest national surveys of LGBT Asian/Pacific Islanders and homeless young people.

You often talk about broadening the movement. Do we risk becoming too diffused to be effectual by doing that?

We are simply too small a community to win anything by ourselves. The only way we are going to advance equal rights under the law is with allies. You don't get allies by just running to them whenever you need their help. You need to be there for them when they need your help. Let me give you an example. We worked against an antichoice initiative in California in 2006, and we provided staff to help coordinate the field effort in L.A. Without even having to ask them, Planned Parenthood—when we wanted to figure out where we stood with California voters on marriage equality—gave us a list of nearly a million people to call in California because we helped them. We could never have that access to that resource to help figure out our campaign strategy to win marriage equality in California. The payoffs versus the investment are simply extraordinary.

What are you most proud of at the Task Force?

There are so many high points here—going to towns and cities and being with people on election night, win or lose, in Topeka or Bangor or Portland, and being with these people who have given up their lives to win or defend their rights. I think the high point—what I'll always remember—is speaking at the Lincoln Memorial for the 40th anniversary of the Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream" speech.

Do you have any regrets?

The thing that hit me the hardest and will take our community years to overcome is the passage of the state anti-marriage constitutional amendments. Living through that with our state partners who were just working on a shoestring—to witness that occurring and there being no moral outrage among the people of goodwill in this country or the media or the political class, that the rights of a very small minority were being put up for a popular vote—will stick with me forever.

What do you think the community should expect from the next administration?

If it's John McCain, not much. If it's a Democratic administration, and there are Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, we can expect a lot. There are dozens and dozens of steps that the new administration can take unilaterally to improve the lives of LGBT people. Let me just say that in [the Department of Health and Human Services], the program that supports runaway and homeless youth has three right-wing political appointees that have systematically excised funding for LGBT homeless youth programs.

What about ENDA?

ENDA needs to pass. We need to move on to relationship recognition and the repeal of “don't ask, don't tell.” None of these things are heavy lifts. We're not talking about marriage equality.

Is New York's Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act that passed without trans inclusion while you were at the Empire State Pride Agenda a sore spot for you?

It's not a sore spot for me to go back over it again -- it's a sore spot to compare ENDA to SONDA. That's the problem. I've said it repeatedly, and I'll say it again: I made a lot of mistakes in the years leading up to when SONDA was going to pass, but the situations are not comparable. Let's not make the mistakes that we made in New York so that when we're ready to pass ENDA into law, it will be the bill that we want. If we'd made SONDA trans-inclusive in the early '90s, by the time we did enough political work and deal-making with the Republicans to get it through the senate and the [then] Republican governor, the bill would have [passed]. If you make bills inclusive from the start, you get an inclusive bill at the end. If you have exclusive bills at the start, it takes forever to come back and make the law inclusive.

What about the idea that once lawmakers go back to their districts and realize they didn't pay a price during the election for their pro-ENDA vote, it will be easier to convince them to add transgender protections?

It's based on a myth that elected officials who take a stand for LGBT rights face consequences at the polls. That's a myth at the state, local, and federal level. You can't find one single elected federal official who's ever paid a price. You can't find a single state elected official who's ever paid a price -- meaning they lost their bid for reelection -- because they took a stand for LGBT rights. Not one. It's buying into the myth.

Does the community have a blind spot right now?

HIV and AIDS. For a while, the AIDS establishment was big and thriving. But in the last 15 years, the power of the LGBT movement has increased and the political clout of the AIDS community has decreased. The other factor is that a lot of LGBT people have just thrown their hands up and

said, "What can we do about this? We've done everything we can." But the rates of HIV infections and deaths of African-American gay and bi men are appalling. The shrug of the shoulders that these statistics get has to change.

And what has the government done?

Nothing.

We think the government has done all this work, and they haven't done shit, frankly. Basic science hasn't been done. No one can say with any degree of scientific certainty why the rates of HIV among African-American gay and bi men are so high. We don't know if it's behavior, genetic susceptibility to HIV, general lack of access to health care, or general stressors in the world that affect African-Americans. So many people in the white LGBT community have a racist response to these numbers and act as if we know what started this. We don't have a clue. And until we organize as a community and really put pressure to get the government to respond and figure this out, then it is indeed hopeless. That's a huge blind spot.