



## A Foreman Farewell

The Task Force's Leader, a Former AVP, Pride Agenda Chief, Goes West

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Confronted with the performance measure made famous in 1980 by then-presidential hopeful Ronald Reagan, Matt Foreman offered a crisp, carefully delineated answer. **Asked whether the LGBT community nationally is better off than it was five years ago, when the departing executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) assumed his post, Foreman said, "I would say the movement is working together more than ever before, it is better funded, and it has a much more coherent vision for progress at the state and local level."**

Foreman spoke to Gay City News on April 8, just one week shy of his last day at the Task Force. After 18 years in movement leadership posts in New York - including the top jobs at the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project from 1990-1996 and the Empire State Pride Agenda, the state's LGBT rights lobby, from 1997-2003 - and many more years as an activist, he is assuming the reins of the gay and lesbian program at the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. The Fund is a San-Francisco-based philanthropic group that has given hundreds of millions of dollars in support to cultural and civic institutions in the Bay Area, low-income families, their children, and their neighborhoods, and immigrant and gay rights initiatives.

In spite of amendments to bar same-sex marriage, and in some cases domestic partnership rights as well, that voters have approved for dozens of state constitutions in recent years - harm that Foreman conceded will take "years and years" to undo - he noted the significant progress on nondiscrimination protections and partnership rights in numerous states, especially since the beginning of 2007.

With full marriage equality in Massachusetts, civil unions or their equivalent in Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, New Hampshire, California, and Oregon, and more limited partnership recognition in Maine, Washington State, and Hawaii, Foreman confidently predicted that marriage equality will be enacted by the State Legislature and governor in New Jersey, perhaps as early as 2009, which, he said, would hasten the inevitability of the same result in New York. With a Democratic governor, California, where the Legislature has twice approved marriage equality bills, would likely also join that club.

On April 7, at NGLTF's annual Leadership Awards, held in the Times Center in Midtown, where he was honored along with Governor David Paterson (who delivered hilarious remarks via video, saying he was being held "hostage" by Albany's "dysfunctional" budget process) and filmmaker John Waters (funny in very different ways), Foreman noted recent Task Force achievements, ranging from its role last year in helping beat back a constitutional amendment drive to overturn gay marriage in Massachusetts to its landmark study of LGBT youth homelessness, which the New York City Council is drawing on to enhance its commitment to funding solutions.

But Foreman made no bones about significant hurdles burdening the LGBT rights movement and the community generally.

In addition to the pernicious state constitutional amendments already passed, he pointed to the effort to enact one in California this year - which would make moot any gains at the gubernatorial

level there - as "the biggest challenge facing the movement," and also noted the alarmingly high rates of HIV infection rates that persist, especially among young men of color; the need to keep the movement relevant not only among the new generation but also more generally among LGBT Americans of all ages, many in the big cities, who "think we're farther along than we are;" and the difficulties of reaching consensus on the community's legislative agenda in Washington.

That last issue, of course, during the past eight months, thrust Foreman into the highest profile public role he's ever had in the national movement. Last week, he explained that when Democrats grabbed control of Congress in the 2006 elections - and progress on Capitol Hill, stalled since the Gingrich revolution of 1994, once again seemed possible - leading advocacy groups embraced an unprecedented common agenda that focused first and foremost on passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), with protections based on gender identity and expression as well as sexual orientation.

The only other significant goal agreed upon was "maybe" hearings on ending the Don't Ask, Don't Tell military policy. "And we took the hate crimes bill as a given," Foreman said. "We didn't see it as a gay priority issue."

In fact, by September the unanimity around a trans-inclusive ENDA was in tatters, with out gay Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank, a chief sponsor of the bill, warning that gender identity protections would doom the measure in the House. The Democratic leadership stripped the bill of those provisions and the community fractured. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the lead LGBT Capitol Hill lobby, took a nuanced - its critics said overly cute - approach, saying it neither supported nor opposed the amended Frank bill. By the time it came around to a floor vote in early November, however, HRC caved, and brought around leading non-LGBT civil rights groups to rally behind Frank's efforts.

The stripped down bill passed the House on November 7 by a 235-184 vote.

That vote came in the face of fervent opposition by more than 300 LGBT groups at the national, state, and local level, who formed a coalition led by NGLTF and the National Center for Transgender Equality. The battle pitted Foreman against both HRC leadership and Frank. In a famous exchange between the Task Force chief and the congressman in February, Foreman charged that Frank "has always been pretty squeamish on the trans issue." The Massachusetts Democrat shot back that Foreman was simply "covering his ass."

Last week, Foreman was more generous in his words about Frank - "I don't question his ability to lead" - but stuck to his guns that other champions, including more openly lesbian and gay members of Congress, are needed to advance the community's agenda. He is particularly critical of the way in which the advice of Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin, an openly lesbian Madison Democrat, was ignored; she felt that the votes could be rounded up for the trans-inclusive version, and Foreman has noted several times that she was the legislator who successfully lined up the support for the hate crimes measure.

"I thought the way she was treated in the ENDA struggle was shameful, with lots of overtones of misogyny," he said, in a comment that might spur a new riposte from Frank.

Foreman clearly believes the underlying conflict over ENDA has not been resolved. Massachusetts Democrat Ted Kennedy plans to bring the Frank version to a vote in the Senate, but Foreman doubts he can win the 60 votes needed to beat back the inevitable Republican filibuster. And that's a good thing, he said, since a measure passed by both the House and Senate - but presumably vetoed by President George W. Bush - would set the table for next year.

"Congress is a creature of history," Foreman said. "If lightning strikes and it passes the Senate, it will more than likely be the broken ENDA that is introduced next year because it will have passed both houses. That was the tragedy of the broken ENDA passing the House in the first place."

Even if the Frank version of ENDA does not go into 2009 with the wind at its back, Foreman is not 100 percent confident that the situation can be righted. Asked whether HRC and the 300-plus dissident groups have come to a meeting of the minds, he said flatly, "No. Not that I'm aware of."

Beyond that, even if a trans-inclusive ENDA consensus re-emerges and there is a president who would sign such a bill, the community must be very "sophisticated" in its other legislative "asks" next year.

"So many of us say, 'Well, pass a law,'" Foreman said. "Well, we've found that it's hard to pass a law. We've never had one. I am concerned since Congress has never done anything for us, they'll do one thing and say, 'See you later.'"

He is optimistic, however, about advances that can come from presidential executive orders and regulatory changes - on issues such as nondiscrimination in federal contracting, greater research on community needs, and even the right of partners of foreign service officers to be evacuated in the event of an overseas emergency. Changes of this sort will come much more easily, Foreman said, than incremental legislation strengthening partnership rights - and there is broad community agreement on what those asks are.

At the state level, Foreman applauded the emergence of "collaboratives" on key policy issues, which have fostered dialogue and the sharing of expertise among local groups and funders, and increased the pot of available resources nationwide.

"Relatively modest investments both politically and in capacity building at the state level can really deliver results," he said. "You can tip a state senate race for \$40,000." Foreman noted that the ante is considerably higher in congressional races.

His key concern this year is the potential for a marriage amendment in California, where anti-gay forces are nearing the deadline for filing petition signatures. The Task Force, with a commitment of \$70,000, is working to upend that first step. Fighting the amendment itself, a battle Foreman said can be won, would cost millions in his view, maybe as much as \$15 million.

If California enacts a state constitutional amendment, he warned, "it's going to set marriage equality back for quite a long time."

A marriage amendment in Florida also looms, though he noted that the anti-gay forces there must win a super-majority of 60 percent, so that fight too is winnable. And Foreman is less concerned that gay marriage will become the high profile issue it was in presidential politics in 2004, even if it is contested in two of the largest states.

"Marriage equality will never again be the wedge issue it was," he said. "People are just over it."

Addressing HIV, Foreman argued that explanations for why transmissions are as high as they are among young African-American gay and bi men - whether those explanations rely on the purported link in that population between drugs and sex or on the failure of black churches - are based on "racist assumptions."

"No one knows why these rates are so high," he said, but noted that among 129 interventions in the African-American community approved for funding by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only one focuses on men who have sex with men. Gay community leadership has become far too complacent about HIV funding, relying on AIDS groups to fight that battle alone.

"At this point the LGBT community has more political pull than the AIDS community," Foreman said, arguing that the gay grassroots must once again be enlisted in the fight.

In fact, motivating the grassroots about the community's political agenda generally is a key concern for him.

"I think a huge challenge for us is how to make the LGBT movement relevant for young people," Foreman said. "Lots of them don't define themselves as gay or lesbian, and many adult people think we're farther along than we are. They ask, 'What are we fighting for?'"

That may be due in part to the transformation of the queer movement from a liberation struggle into one based on a fight for equal rights.

"We aborted the conversation about who we really are too early in our movement and got into a very comfortable rights framework," he argued. "So we could talk about rights and not sex. There has been a real pull, particularly in the marriage equality movement, to present our community as life-long monogamous couples who want to have kids and have a white picket fence. And that's true for a portion of our community, and that's utterly disingenuous for the majority of our community."

Foreman suggested that might be part of what creates the disconnect between LGBT people and the movement and, more intriguingly, added it might also be creating confusion in the wider society.

"Straight people know who we are," he said, "and it doesn't ring true for the gay people they know."