



**Rea Carey, Task Force Executive Director
Speech given at the 2008 Los Angeles Leadership Awards**

Good afternoon, Los Angeles!

I am so thrilled to be with you today. It feels good to be here in California – or as we refer to it in the rest of the country, "the land of the free!"

It is good to see so many old friends, welcome our new friends, and honor the life's work of Sid Scheinberg and the genius behind MILK. Before I start with my remarks, I'd like to recognize one of the extraordinary people portrayed in the film - and also the person who conceived of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt - who is here with us today, Cleve Jones.

We also have with us a heroine of the civil rights and human rights struggles, Delores Huerta. She is the co-founder of United Farm Workers and will be the keynote speaker at our National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change, in Denver on January 28th through February 1st.

I also want to honor some of my predecessors who have served as past Task Force executive directors who are here with us today. As we like to say at the Task Force, once you're in the family you never really leave. Please join me in recognizing Torie Osborn, Lorri Jean and my dear friend and Task Force leader for the last five years, Matt Foreman.

I am honored to continue the stewardship of this organization – an organization that has been responsible for more political gains, more concrete outcomes that benefit people's lives, and more strengthening of our movement in the last three decades than any other national LGBT organization.

Many of you in this room have been fans and supporters of the Task Force for years – a few of you even for the 35 years since we were founded - and we thank you for being part of building the political power of our community. Others of you may not know much about our work at the Task Force, but we aim to change that in the coming years!

At the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, we work every day to eliminate the possibility that our lives will be subject to someone else's judgment, someone's condemnation of our humanity, our love, and our inalienable freedom to pursue life, liberty and happiness. None of us, not a single one of us, should live in fear of prosecution, persecution or punishment for who we are and whom we love.

The good news for all of us is that our progress toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality is nothing short of astounding.

Just 40 years ago, not a single law protected lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from discrimination. Today, over half the nation's population lives in a jurisdiction that outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I'm proud to say that Task Force staff wrote many of those laws and partnered with state and local organizations to pass and implement them.

Additionally, the Task Force -- staff, board, supporters, and volunteers -- have worked tirelessly to ensure that nearly 40 percent of the population lives in a jurisdiction that prohibits discrimination against people on the basis of gender identity and expression. Much has been said about how these laws protect transgender members of our community. I want to note, however, that these laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity benefit all of us -- you and me, a lesbian with short hair who likes to wear suits, as much as it does our transgender friends. Someone like me is more likely to get fired -- not because I am a lesbian, but because I don't act or look like what many in society believe a woman should act or look like. That is gender identity. These laws that protect transgender people, protect the rest of us too.

More good news is that our progress is accelerating: 2007 was the best legislative year ever in states across the country on issues of nondiscrimination, anti-bullying, gender identity protections, and comprehensive protections for same-sex couples.

Marriage equality and family recognition were barely dreams 15 years ago. Today - knowing that the struggle for full family equality is far from over -- marriage equality is legal in California AND Massachusetts, and those marriages are even recognized in New York, Rhode Island.

I am so proud of the work the Task Force has done over the last 35 years to make all of this change happen. And so proud of the work we have done together. Your activism and your support of the Task Force makes this progress possible, indeed, makes winning inevitable. But, winning takes a lot of work and now, my friends we are in the fight of the century to win something very dear -- to have our love, our basic humanity, respected as equal under the law.

There are many areas of our work I could tell you about today, but certainly I am compelled to talk about our work to achieve and keep the freedom to marry in California.

One of the things we have learned over the years at the Task Force through dozens of ballot measure fights is this: start early, start early, start early. We know that in many ways the biggest obstacle we have in any ballot measure fight is time -- in this case, we have 44 days left to convince a lot of undecided voters to vote NO on Proposition 8 here in California.

But, the Task Force is an organization that puts our money and expertise where our mouth is. As part of a nationwide strategy to work for marriage equality, five years ago we and a handful of other organizations including Equality California, the LA Center and others, met here in California to strategize.

The Task Force put into action the lessons we have learned through our work on so many ballot measure fights across the country and immediately started investing money and staff expertise into building a solid public education campaign on marriage.

Starting five years ago:

- We funded Vote for Equality, here at the LA Center, to identify thousands of pro-LGBT voters.
- We convened coalitions of faith leaders, labor, pro-choice, and people of color organizations to work together in unprecedented ways on marriage equality.
- We helped to found and staff organizations we all knew we would need in order to truly educate the public on our lives -- including organizations like Faith for Equality.
- The Task Force secured funding for some of the first staff positions working on marriage equality in community-based organizations here in California.
- We moved more of our own staff here to train activists and volunteers, and we directed money and attention to California from across the country.

When those who seek to deny equality and freedom qualified an anti-marriage measure for the November ballot, our sister political organization, the Task Force Action Fund, was asked by what became the No on 8 campaign to run the most massive, sophisticated field campaign ever designed for a ballot measure affecting our community. We established the Task Force Action Fund California Campaign Committee: No on 8, and our organizers – the most talented organizers in the movement - dug in to do the hard work of securing votes.

Since the measure made it onto the ballot this spring, we have had all but a couple of our organizers here on the ground in California since the spring.

And, as of a week from now, all of our 11 organizers will have moved here to work day and night to defeat this hateful measure. We are very proud that our very own Task Force project director Sarah Reece is serving as statewide field director for the campaign.

We knew that in donating our organizers in-kind to serve as the field operation of the campaign, we would be giving California our best experts in winning. Our Task Force organizers and the dozens of other organizers who have been hired or are volunteering have created a grassroots machine the likes of which this country has never seen on an LGBT issue.

As part of the broader No on 8 campaign:

- We have conducted 40-50 phone banks a week statewide.
- We have trained people to fill over 7,600 volunteer shifts since May.
- As part of our conversations with voters around the state, we have already raised twice as much money for the campaign – over \$435,000 dollars- from 5, 10, and 20 dollar donors than we thought we would in the entire election cycle.
- We have created brand new models for grassroots organizing on LGBT issues that will benefit other states for years to come.

Why have the Task Force and our sister political organization The Task Force Action Fund invested so heavily in California for five years? Why have we poured hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and staff time here? Because, yes, we are passionate about the ability of couples to get married in California.

But also because we know that what happens in *this* election, what happens on *this* vote, will play a critical role in the ability, or inability, of other states – in fact our nation - to win the freedom to marry. *And, the other side knows it too.* And that is why this fight is more sophisticated on both sides and more expensive on both sides than any other fight we've waged before.

After having many conversations with people – gay and straight – this week here in Los Angeles as I've been raising money to fight this ballot measure, one of the things that I've learned is that many people assume we will win because, well, why wouldn't we? The polls say we will, my friends seem to think we will. I want to make one thing clear, we are *not assured of winning this* unless we pull out all the stops. You have and will see polls about our being ahead by some number of points. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security. This ballot measure is far closer than any of these polls would suggest. We must stay engaged and we must put everything we have into this fight in order to win. In fact, I encourage you not only to give money to the No on 8 campaign, but to volunteer at phone banks, talk to your friends and family, and help get people out to vote.

I have a daughter. She has been growing up in Washington, DC and is a little political animal. And, the best way I have been able to explain my job to her is to tell her that I get to work for freedom.

You can imagine how hard it has been then to explain to her that there are people in this world who don't believe that moms like hers should be able to get married like some of her friends' parents have done. To a 7 year old with the wonders of the world ahead of her and the innocence of her 7 short years, this is a very hard thing to grasp. So when we were able to tell her that freedom had won out in California, and that we can now get married, needless to say she was thrilled... and immediately asked to be the flower girl. She started telling her friends at school, and to a one, her peers congratulated her and celebrated our family.

So, one week ago yesterday, my partner Margaret and I gathered our friends and our family in Northern California and got married.

And, now, our daughter is back at school telling proud tales of her moms getting married. The amazing thing is that not one child has questioned her about two women getting married. Not one.

Now, interestingly, it turns out half the kids thought we were already married. But, this tells us something about the future. This tells us that someday, our daughter's generation will become adults and this will not be an issue of debate. It will simply be the case that two people who love each other will be able to get married, and not have to travel across the country to do so. I do look forward to that day.

However, in the meantime, the path to getting to that day is in your hands – in the hands of voters here in California. You and everyone you know **MUST** vote No on Proposition 8 in November.

After the election is over this fall, whatever the outcome, the work at the Task Force goes forward to build the political power of the LGBT community from the ground up.

We are an organization that has been able to focus like a laser on the critical political battles of our time – in this case marriage – *and* also hold up and pursue the bigger picture of what we are about as a people.

So, over the years, as the Task Force has worked on and achieved so many of the advances our community has had, we have been able to say "Yes!" ... "And"

Yes, winning the right to visit our partners in the hospital and make life and death decisions is precious indeed ... **AND**, we pursue policies that make it so our elders entering into assisted living programs or nursing homes do not have to go back into the closet after being out for 10, 30, 50 years.

Yes, we celebrated the Supreme Court's overturning sodomy laws and knew we'd be safer in the bedrooms of our own homes... **AND**, we pursue a culture that allows each of us to express who we are as sexual beings without shame; to kiss on the streets in big cities and small towns without fear of being attacked.

Yes, we cried with joy when marriage became legal in California last spring... **AND** we work for a day when getting adequate health care or survivor benefits, or even the guardianship of our own children if our partner dies, are not bestowed upon us through marriage or employment, but rather by simply being a member of society and being a human on this planet.

This is the type of organization we've been and *this* is the organization you can count on us being as we move forward.

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For 35 years, the Task Force has been the home for people like you, like me, like hundreds of thousands of people across this country who know that winning legal rights is not the ceiling of equality, but rather the floor from which we build and work for a transformed culture and society. By being here today, you are part of a bigger community of people who hold out hope – not just for piecemeal protections, but for the ability to bring our full selves, our whole selves to any endeavor we pursue, be it personal, spiritual or professional. Thank you for supporting the work of the Task Force – we could not do it without you.

So, now, my friends, to close, please join me in a toast to honor all who have worked so hard here in California to make marriage equality a reality, to those working to keep it, and to those of us who have and who will be tying the knot in this state.

Thank you!