

TRANSADVOCATE

Activism Leaders Leading Towards the Door

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Abstract

“We’re setting sail to the place on the map from which no one has ever returned” -- Ship of Fools, World Party It was just Tuesday that I read in the press that Gay/Lesbian/Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) founding executive director Kevin Jennings was stepping down. He announced he will be back from his current [...]

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It was just Tuesday that I read in the press that Gay/Lesbian/Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) founding executive director Kevin Jennings was stepping down. He announced he will be back from his current sabbatical as planned on Feb. 1, but will step down on August 1, 2008 after thirteen years. According to another organization source, he isn’t taking a different job or even discussing future directions - it’s merely an open-ended departure.

Now on Wednesday, 24 hours later, I read about another leader stepping down. The National Gay & Lesbian Task Force executive director Matt Foreman announced he will be stepping down in April, the month of his fifth anniversary with NGLTF. He will be moving from a very highly visible NGLTF position to chair the gay and lesbian program at the Evelyn & Walter Haas Fund. It’s almost like moving from Manhattan, New York City to Manhattan, Kansas.

To lay population there’s no connection in these announcements at all. Coincidental, to be sure - even though it comes on the threshold of what could be the biggest sea change politically that’s been seen for nearly 15 years. We’re literally on the threshold of going from the gloom of conservative guilt-mongering and repression to the brightness of progressive and more socially conscious times. There’s a perfect storm brewing in favor of humans of all walks, and especially favorable to the gay and lesbian, perhaps even the transgender community.

So with that stated, why would leaders of two very prominent, egalitarian-minded GLBT organizations decide to leave before the game is won?

Burn out is a possibility, but not likely - especially in Matt Foreman’s case. The position Foreman carved in media gave him plenty of soundbite prominence, to which both the camera seemed to like and he appeared to mutually enjoy. It’s odd that he would leave that at such a key point in the coming bell curve of visibility.

There are no apparent health or aging issues that would predicate the departure. And unlike post 9/11 when there was a watershed of leadership changes due to a general demoralizing pall and sense of hopelessness in the country, we're seeing an opposite sociopolitical climate now.

To the lay population there's no connection, and it's mere coincidence. To those involved heavily in GLBT sociopolitics, especially in the transgender-specific portion, there's much more to read into these changes. The going theory is that the United ENDA coalition will break up when it becomes evident that the non-inclusive ENDA passage becomes imminent.

When the truth about Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and Rep. Barney Frank finally became unavoidably evident beginning in late September of last year, an ad-hoc coalition of more than 300 national, state and local organizations sprung up to combat the abandonment of the original transgender-inclusive Employment Non Discrimination Act (ENDA). This coalition - United ENDA coalition - was spearheaded by NGLTF under Foreman's leadership and contained virtually every major gay and lesbian led organization in the country (including GLSEN) outside of HRC.

It was a lightning swift, awesome show of force in unity - with much of the credit for that organizational coalition effort going to transman legal wunderkind, Shannon Minter with National Center for Lesbian Rights for the footwork, and Mara Keisling at NCTE for being the trans face and ad-hoc representative spokesperson within the coalition itself.

The outsiders had finally taken a stand of their own and drew in all in their vicinity to support this new effort, and it brought a lot of attention in the media. However, it also drew HRC and Barney Frank's attention as well. Almost as quickly as Keisling's 180-degree turn from collaborator to blatant critic of HRC, if not necessarily Frank, she then turned back again in self-restraint on public comments.

It turned out HRC was actively seeking replacement for the "insider" trans person / organization that Mara had just left void. Rep. Barney Frank was rather openly (as an ad-hoc organizer) trying to find another replacement to speak to the transgender community about the benefits of an employment bill that leaves trans out. Moreover, Barney - the bellwether of where politics sides in much of Gay/Lesbian America - levied some blistering criticism at Mara Keisling herself, calling her a "stupid ass" for coordinating this effort, and affixing the same name to all the new ad-hoc coalition of outsiders who followed her.

It was pretty serious name-calling, and all parties on the receiving end of the epithet remained strangely silent. Obviously the barbs had found their target and the stings were felt.

In the past month, the board of NCTE has been very pointed about their sentiments towards HRC, if not necessarily Barney Frank. However Mara Keisling has been notably tempered in any speech for the record - much more so than her board. Rumor, though unsubstantiated, has it that she's especially over concerned about being supplanted by another go-to transgender selection from Frank and HRC and hopes to find a way to put her group back to the collaborative, "go-to" status with HRC. Even her own words noted in Becky Juro's radio show stated they will "have to work in the same space" in Washington.

Some of the parties contacted by both Frank and HRC about a new entity are helping NCTE by not taking the bait. But a few obstacles stand in Keisling's way. Now that the trans community has come

around to a united front in opposition to HRC and Frank - flames that she's been actively involved in fanning - she will find it at the very least nearly impossible to go back to HRC without divorcing herself from the community she represents. Also, history has shown HRC to be a hypersensitive suitor, and any show of disloyalty from their favor is repaid by distinct reduction in trust that is never forgotten (to wit: GenderPAC). They're unforgiving.

Lastly, any move back into collaboration with HRC while the United ENDA Coalition holding the bag, especially by someone viewed as the linchpin to the very effort, would be viewed very dimly.

And on the United ENDA coalition, it's been openly wondered in the trans community what would occur if a non-inclusive ENDA is imminent to pass. Would all the GLBT orgs stand in opposition even up to and after the new president's signing the bill into law? If so, how would these gay and lesbian created, led, fed and staffed organizations appear to the gay and lesbian community when they stood on record opposing legislation that helps their own? It's not simply a casual dilemma.

"Friends run like rats from a sinking ship
Leaving you naked to the night.
Now you're known as the last resort." -- Ugly Head, Marc Almond

Speculation among trans community "non-insider" leaders is that this coalition will last for the time, at least until a new president (a hoped-for Democratic president) is in office. Once that occurs, especially if it's Hillary Clinton, conventional wisdom has it that the 2009 ENDA will fly through both houses of Congress and the president will gladly sign it into law. The United ENDA Coalition members, those especially in the large gay / lesbian led groups, will start seriously considering if they really want to be left off of that bandwagon and victory parade.

The prediction is that the United ENDA coalition will collapse at the beginning of, or even before the 2009 legislative session. Particularly, if these groups have any sense that Mara Keisling herself wanted back on the inside with HRC or Barney, you can bet this whole coalition will collapse and disappear quicker than a house of cards. After all their efforts, they want to be heroes in gay and lesbian history. If HRC of all groups is up there, why wouldn't they want to have their day in that spotlight too?

One thing to keep in mind, how do we think their respective large donors and boards of directors - prominently and overwhelmingly gay and lesbian - are going to view these organizations after such an abandonment of what could be the largest gay and lesbian victory in the nation's history? Principled stands are heroic, but faced with absolute intransigence by Rep. Barney Frank, and most importantly Sen. Ted Kennedy (whose seat Barney longs to inherit someday soon), heroism can get them killed.

So what we may be seeing here are organizational leaders who are looking into their crystal ball and seeing their future. For prominent organizations, especially someone like Matt Foreman with the coalition leader NGLTF, would they even want any remote involvement in what would well be a breakneck 180 by a United ENDA leader? Would they be able to face what will predictably be a transgender hue and cry that will blister the paint off of walls in China over such a stunning act? Clearly no.

They're rather smartly stepping out of the way of what will likely be a very bipolar period of euphoria and tumult. Being a coastal resident next to the Gulf, and especially considering what hard choices are

coming down the chute at them, I can't blame them for leaving well in advance of the storm. It could be a monster.

"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing." -- President Abraham Lincoln

For those of us involved in activism over the years, these aren't surprises. They're pieces of the puzzle fitting snugly into place.

True, these are outside speculations, some of these issues are unsubstantiated at this time and there's no way for anyone to have the complete picture except for the primary parties themselves from their specific perspectives - and they certainly will not allow that information to be public. Those of us truly on the outside must take the few clues that are given and determine the pattern. After a decade or more of this, we've become adept at discerning patterns - thus, our lack of surprise.

Hopefully some of this will change the original direction of these things in order to avoid self-fulfilling the prophecy. Meanwhile, feel free to consider this nothing more than conspiracy theory - that's understandable. Just keep in mind the some "theories" are only that until the truths that are currently unknown become truths that are known. Come back in 2009 and we'll compare notes then about this wild conspiracy theory. I hope that it turns out to be dead wrong, but I fear that it won't.

"Using all the good people for your galley slaves
as you're little boat struggles through the warning waves, but you don't pay
You will pay tomorrow.
You're gonna pay tomorrow
Save me! Save me from tomorrow.
I don't want to sail with this ship of fools" -- Ship of Fools, World Party

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