

Looking Back: How The G&L Views The T

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Abstract

There's been quite a buzz in recent months over our GLBT community - particularly how the GL views and treats the T. It's reached a fevered pitch with Rep. Barney Frank tampering with the ENDA language and the release of the movie "Trannies With Knives" by gay male prostitute-turned-film maker Israel Luna.

Article

"Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness." -- George Santayana

There's been quite a buzz in recent months over our GLBT community - particularly how the GL views and treats the T. It's reached a fevered pitch with Rep. Barney Frank tampering with the ENDA language and the release of the movie "Trannies With Knives" by gay male prostitute-turned-film maker Israel Luna (of which I'll write on later).

While all this was transpiring, a couple of anniversaries passed without notice. Ten years ago this past Monday, on March 22, 2000 was the meeting between the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) at HRC HQ in downtown DC, not far from K Street.

Six weeks earlier, on Feb. 11, 2000 was the National Roundtable meeting between the Gay & Lesbian organizations, Trans organizations and a few from academe at the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) headquarters, then on Kalorama NW. in Columbia Heights.

The NGLTF roundtable was the brainchild of their executive director, Kerry Lobel, with assistance from PFLAG, and came at a crucial point in GLBT history. It was a period of flux, where the Trans community first began truly exercising its voice.

Only nine months had passed since the largest Trans lobby day on record at GenderPAC, but it created fissures within the T community, with GPAC announcing a move toward "gender" and later "gender orientation." Also at that lobby day was a seeming closeness developing between GPAC and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and a simultaneous cooling off between them and NGLTF.

Meanwhile the Trans community who were not part of the east coast cabal were breaking from them, and speaking out independently and more pointedly about HRC, with one faction forming what became NTAC later in 1999. At the same time, NGLTF was becoming more pointedly critical of HRC, with PFLAG and others cooling off towards both they and GPAC.

New alliances were being struck, rhetoric was being lobbed back and forth and the community seemed to be roiling. The timing was perfect to have a meeting of the minds to hash things out and avoid a

boil-over.

Besides Kerry Lobel and Blake Cornish from NGLTF, and Rob Schlittler and Cynthia Newcomer of PFLAG, and other notables (of whom I can still remember) were Nancy Buermeyer of HRC, Chai Feldbum of Georgetown School of Law, Robert Sember of Columbia School of Public Health, as well as reps from LLEGO, NYAC, Lambda Legal and GLMA.

The bulk of the Trans attendance was NTAC: Monica Roberts, Dr. Sarah Fox, Michael Gray, Chelsea Goodwin, Rusty Mae Moore and I in person, with Dawn Wilson, Yoseñio Lewis, Katrina Rose and Deni Scott via teleconference. Additionally attending were Pauline Park and Donna Cartwright from NYAGRA. Even though Donna would not resign from GPAC's board for another eight months, she did not declare to represent them at this meeting, curiously enough.

The meeting displayed unspoken symbolism of the community status quo. For the T community it was a watershed, displaying that we did actually have some strong allies, and quite a bit more than we'd presumed. It also showed that GPAC was beginning to wane in the community's eyes so soon after working collegially with HRC. HRC was feeling surrounded, pained and combative due to their being the only non-inclusive org (they had still refused to add Trans to their mission statement even) and the controversy swirling around their participation in the Millennium March.

And NTAC personified the spirit of this juggernaut of energy in the Trans movement of not waiting or settling for clever image-crafting sleight of hand (such as "gender" being all-inclusive) nor pat answers of accepting that we must be "incremental" and left out of gay rights bills. For many T-folk outside of the northeast (and increasingly within as well) it was becoming obvious we needed something different, with stronger and more forthright representation.

"The meeting was a very good start to build alliances," NTAC vice-chair, Yoseñio Lewis, noted at the time. "For the most part everybody played well together. There was a tense moment when Nancy Buermeyer brought up the friction between HRC and NTAC."

Indeed I was out of the room getting the nickel tour with Kerry Lobel, and when we walked back in, it was over: Monica Roberts and Chelsea Goodwin had their backs up, Nancy Buermeyer was crying and Michael Gray was offering to set up a group-to-group meeting between HRC and NTAC. Nancy shoved, and apparently Monica and then Chelsea shoved back.

However, to a person, everyone except Buermeyer left that roundtable with a lot of hope and enthusiasm.

And for the record, I'm not overlooking out NCTE. At that point no one in political circles had heard of Mara Keisling as she was still months away from her first participation in Trans activism with GPAC, and three years away from creating her own organization.

"When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards." -- Theodore Zeldin, philosopher

The following month was "the fact-to-face" at HRC presaging their eventual move to include the T in their mission statement. The meeting, set up by Michael Gray, occurred as the IFGE conference in

Arlington, VA was taking place (giving us an opportunity to knock out two birds with one throw).

For my part I wanted no participation in this meeting or the trip. At that time, I was having bouts of heart arrhythmias, major burnout, stress from both of the support groups I was heading (including one member's suicide the month before) and major stress from my misogynistic boss at the time which included a fight over having to take those three days off of work.

Added to this was additional pressure from NTAC's interim chair, Dawn Wilson, who insisted/demanded that I (as a steering committee member) attend the meeting as a show of support, even though I had no clue what the 'ask' was to be or what we hoped to accomplish with it. Additionally Monica Roberts had already left one of her buddy passes reserved for me at Continental Airlines (where she worked).

It was my opinion (accurate, as it turned out) that HRC would not view us lowly Trans folk as contemporaries or equals in any of our lifetimes and was against my better judgment, but I relented.

My trip was timed so that I'd have enough time to land in DCA (Reagan National Airport), trek over to the Crystal City Hilton where IFGE's convention was located, drop my luggage off in the room I'd share with Anne Casebeer, Dawn Wilson and Monica Roberts who were driving down from Louisville, change into a business suit and then travel presumably en masse to HRC.

Arriving at the hotel, I noticed that my roomies- hadn't checked in. Hmm ... quandary! Time was tight for the meeting to begin, I had no clue how long it would take in transit to HRC's HQ and I didn't know if my roomies were just driving straight in to HRC. I didn't even own a cell phone at that point!

Plan B, I hailed a cab and traveled to HRC, then housed in an office suite not far off of K Street lobbyist's corridor. Arriving early, I slogged upstairs with baggage in tow and cooled my heels at the front office, looking like some kind of Trans refugee in my faded jeans and running shoes. Needless to say there were numerous staffers walking through, giving (ahem) the semi-discreet side-eyed looks as they walked through, wondering "what is this in our office?"

While sitting there waiting, I kept wondering why I was even there, how the airlines almost didn't let me on the plane due to buddy-pass complications, and how I wished I would've simply missed the flight and stayed home and gone back to work. There was a legit excuse!

As 2PM neared, Nancy Buermeyer popped out and brought me (bags and all) into the conference room. We met and chatted quite a bit as we occasionally ran into each other over the years, beginning in 1996 at Houston's ICTLEP conference. Nancy, Tony Barretto-Neto and I even went out country & western dancing at a local lesbian bar, The Ranch. Keep in mind that I was brand new to activism in 1996, and was in "discovery phase" of seeing which side was right: Phyllis Frye's hard-line anti-HRC, or HRC's being unfairly maligned. Over the course of those next three years, I'd learn Phyllis was correct.

After chatting for nearly a half hour, I realized the meeting was already 15 minutes late and I was the only Trans person there! When Tony Varona and Kevin Layton walked in and saw me, and I repeated that I was waiting for "the others", we all sat there with a 'what are we doing here?' look on our faces. I kept a cool exterior, but was beginning to panic and excused myself to the restroom.

After walking out of the restroom, I was relieved to see Michael Gray walking up and asked where the others were. "They're not coming" he whispered. "They weren't ready and won't be here."

Panic began anew, as well as anger as we both walked into the conference. Michael would lead and present his white paper: The Primacy of Gender. I sat there feeling useless, not knowing what to do and wishing I was back home. During the presentation, Alex Fox also dropped in, which evened out the numbers at three HRC, three NTAC. The rest of Michael's presentation went routinely, but ended without any real request or direction other than asking that they all agree that everything GLBT had to do with gender, not sexuality.

We all sat and looked at each other.

So Michael again took it from the top, restarting his presentation and shortly into it used it as a platform to exchange accusations with Buermeyer. Shades of what I'd missed at the Trans Roundtable a month earlier! That was when Alex and I decided to take over.

Nancy railed about NTAC's story of HRC buying Riki Wilchins a condo (something we admitted had no verification and was removed already from the NTAC website) and also requested removal of Katrina Rose's editorial comparing Elizabeth Birch's words to Josef Goebbels.

We decried the lack of trans inclusion in legislation, wanted our own access to legislators in order to educate them on T issues and blasted the pre-lobbying of legislators by HRC and GPAC. On the last item, again Buermeyer insisted there were no such meetings - until I brought up the fact that I had a screen shot saved of GenderPAC's website circa 1998 (thanks to Gwen Smith's eagle eye), noting the specifics of the very meeting at Sen. Harkin's office (the first we were aware of) including who visited ... including Ms. Buermeyer herself.

At that she backpedaled and admitted the meeting did occur after all - but it wasn't pre-lobbying.

In the end, I explained to Nancy, Tony and Kevin that I personally had no problems with them not including us (at that time, Trans was not even part of HRC's mission statement). In fact, that was fine with us: HRC should continue focus on the sexual orientation issues in Congress, and NTAC should focus on the gender identity issues.

As HRC had their ability to get their message to Congress, we stated that NTAC needed our own voice to be heard similarly as we knew our issues experientially. We were also opposed to being shoehorned into a dicey inexplicit coverage under "gender" (which was the prevailing push at that time to get Trans folks to believe they were covered).

HRC threw much of the non-inclusion blame at Barney Frank's feet, wanted NTAC's editorial blasts stopped and all rhetoric about the pre-lobbying with GPAC ceased as well. We explained the pre-lobbying rhetoric would stop so long as they stopped the pre-lobbying visits that we felt poisoned the well before we even arrived.

All seemingly agreed the requests were reasonable and came to a tentative agreement to take them back to our respective leadership to achieve them. When Alex asked Tony Varona about a timeline on when we would hear back from HRC on their behalf, Tony replied that their upcoming Equality Rocks concert was their focus at the moment and gave a soft "couple months" answer.

That response from Tony should've been a sign.

In the interim we removed the offensive editorials, and stuck specifically to news communications as per our half of the agreement. Even when HRC took over and conducted the Millennium March later that year with its unresolved financial controversies, and when many other GLBT orgs were piling on, we didn't capitalize on the situation while they were down.

Though I sent a few Emails to Nancy inquiring of it afterward, we never heard back from them again. They never followed through with us.

“Kick ‘em when they’re up.

Kick ‘em when they’re down.

Kick ‘em when they’re stiff.

Kick ‘em all around.” -- Dirty Laundry, Don Henley

“Even Gandhi, with all his charisma, did not ‘melt the hearts’ of his oppressors, as he had hoped.

After softening, hearts harden again.” -- Theodore Zeldin, philosopher

Much has changed since those meetings in early 2000. At the beginning of 2001, HRC suddenly announced they were including transgender in their mission statement and shortly after began billing themselves as the largest gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights group in the nation. They were not going to allow us our own voice: they would declare oversight of it in order to manage our message themselves.

Responsively NTAC turned up the heat in the media in 2001-2002 and had a measure of progress, even beginning to crack through to mainstream press. HRC claimed they were working with “transgender leadership,” we responded that that were working with GPAC who had recently divested themselves from the T word, and that HRC was indeed not working with us.

We also worked diligently on developing good relations with all our allies apart from HRC. Things progressed well through 2002 and it seemed (save for a number of the former GPAC Trans members) that the community was coming together in a do-it-yourself, shoestring fashion. There was no funding and precious little assistance, but we were moving forward and doing it for ourselves despite it all.

New Years 2003 saw the advent of Mara Keisling, who went through numerous ad-hocs on the periphery before jumping in solo as the professed “hired gun” lobbyist in DC. Six months later, she changed her mind and appointed a board of directors and by year-end was a full-scale organization. As opposed to NTAC, NCTE would work collegially and collaboratively with HRC, not having the same history as the more tenured trans advocates. In fact, of all the trans leadership that were part of those meetings in 2000, the only one on the national-level radar at the moment would be Donna Cartwright who went from GPAC's board to NCTE's board of directors.

Over the next three years, NCTE effectively supplanted NTAC and all its members. It wasn't for malfeasance or being in the wrong (we were actually correct, which ironically worked to our disadvantage). We were replaced strictly for not playing the Washington game: we didn't feel that Trans folks should simply accept our “place” at the bottom of the pecking order.

While playing the game didn't show results immediately, the progress has been coming. There's been a jump in visibility in mainstream media, but it's also a much more controlled, watered-down version than our gay and lesbian counterparts enjoy.

We finally got explicit inclusion in hate crimes legislation and got it passed. And after a couple of false starts, we've also seen legislation written with explicit inclusion as well. But again, in the tightly controlled environment, we still don't know what the language or limitations of this potentially watered-down bill might be - even after so many have lobbied for it, sight unseen.

In early 2000 we seemed to be on a track of true GLBT community cohesion. From 2010's vantage point, that view was quite delusional. The good relations NTAC had with other organizations through 2002 magically vanished almost overnight in 2003, coinciding with Mara's arrival. Shortly thereafter, media relations vanished as well. Most everything began singularly funneling through Mara Keisling afterwards. This was no longer a community dialogue, but a top-down controlled environ.

The last half of this decade saw a decide distance develop between Trans and GLBT organizations as well (NCTE for the most part notwithstanding). The years have seen increasing grassroots Trans criticism and frustration with formerly closer allied groups such as NGLTF, GLAAD, PFLAG and ACLU. It's becoming increasingly evident that the marriage between GLB and T was not made in heaven. It's been a boost in visibility, media and funding for the former, and come at the expense of those in the latter who worked so hard to make T progress in the first place.

Indeed, the trans movement overall has become much more machine-like as a result of having one rep in the GLBT elite who's part of the Washington game. For nearly all of the families and activists who worked so hard over the years for it, even the hate crimes victory had an anti-climactic feel to it. It wasn't our victory: it was Washington's. Even the sentiment that the community's resigned to accepting whatever limited language in ENDA just to have something - anything - speaks to the lack of soul that we used to have.

Then again, it's no major surprise. The Trans community always eschews our own history. What's here today will be forgotten tomorrow by the next generation as we're each compelled to create our own. Even those who lead today helped perpetuate that trend with their predecessors.

A local activist, Jackie Thorne, called me during Christmas holidays. During our conversation, she lamented how our community wasn't "community" in feel any more -we're just a "bunch of individuals now" seeking our individual stardom. The cohesion and cross-pollination in our movement that began the last decade has been replaced by a classic Washington by-the-book, silo style of management complete with its hierarchies and insulated communication.

We've changed quite a bit over the last decade. I can't say it's worse. But I can't say it's better. It's just certainly changed.

"All is flux. Nothing stays still." -- Heraclitus, from the book Diogenes Laertius

"The conquest of the Earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it." -- Joseph Conrad

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