

Remembering Tom Lantos

By Marti Abernathey

Published February 16, 2008

https://www.transadvocate.com/remembering-tom-lantos_n_322.htm

Abstract

“Love cannot be defeated.” as said to rock vocalist, Bono by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA) The political group I belong to - the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) - noted the passing of longtime Rep. Tom Lantos in a press release on Monday from complications due to esophageal cancer. Chances are, most of the transgender [...]

Article

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The political group I belong to - the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) - noted the passing of longtime Rep. Tom Lantos in a press release on Monday from complications due to esophageal cancer. Chances are, most of the transgender community was unfamiliar with congressman Lantos - but they should've been. Our press release characterized him as a “hero for the oppressed and voiceless of the world” and a hero specifically for the transgender community.

Those superlatives were not merely rhetoric.

The San Francisco-area congressman was honored in a memorial service on Capitol Hill yesterday, with an emotional farewell that encompassed both conservatives and liberals, from the U.S. Sec. Of State, Condoleezza Rice, to Sec. Gen. Of the United Nations, Ban-Ki Moon to ambassador of goodwill, rock group vocalist, Bono (Paul Hewson) of U2. Holocaust Survivor, Death Camp Escapee, a Penniless Émigré from Hungary to the United States, Congressman in the U.S. House of Representatives, champion for human rights causes around the world.

“Tom Lantos was a true American hero. He was the embodiment of what it meant to have one’s freedom denied and then to find it and to insist that America stand for spreading freedom and prosperity to others,” -- Sec. Of State Condoleezza Rice.

Indeed I was blessed to have had the opportunity to lobby Lantos’ office on a couple of occasions. Unlike some supposedly trans-supportive offices, they were more than merely perfunctory. The staff always exhibited concern that felt genuine, even being candid with us (something that doesn’t happen as frequently as one might presume). This year’s visit was a perfect example as Lantos was not signed on as co-sponsor for the inclusive version of ENDA (HR 2015), to which I questioned his Judiciary Committee Asst, Michael Beard. Merely an oversight, was his response - and sure enough, Lantos was shortly thereafter a co-sponsor. They “walked the walk.”

In 1999, shortly after our decision to form what would soon be named NTAC, Sarah Fox (also an NTAC

co-founder) and I lobbied - both together and separately to maximize coverage - for a proposed bill still in the works at that point. During the previous session and again in that session, Rep. Tom Lantos noted us specifically - using both transgendered and gender identity - on the floor of the House of Representatives when discuss the need to condemn human rights abuses occurring around the globe.

My involvement in this was purely accidental. Sarah and I had met up for the first time via a mutual friend and yet another NTAC co-founder, Anne Casebeer, during the 1997 GenderPAC (GPAC) Lobby Days. Again, the same group of us who attended both transgender lobbying forays in 1997 ended up right back on Capitol Hill in 1999 - again for a GPAC event.

After two days of lobbying, I was originally scheduled to fly out of Baltimore on a Southwest Airlines flight that Wednesday morning, and stayed with Sarah that Tuesday night as she would provide me a ride to the airport from our hotel in suburban DC. It turned out that we overslept, and I was going to miss that flight. After a quick phone call to Southwest, they said I could reschedule for free - but I would have to fly out on the same flight two days later.

Normally, this wouldn't be amenable. But I had a decent enough job that allowed me an extra two days off, and my sister was around to water and feed my dog, Bad Bertha. So I had an extra two days in DC, and Sarah had already planned to stay the rest of the week after she discovered Lantos' comments on the floor. Oddly, neither the staff and organizers at GPAC, nor anyone else attending appeared to be aware of the Lantos statements.

"Chairman Lantos will be remembered as a man of uncommon integrity and sincere moral conviction -- and a public servant who never wavered in his pursuit of a better, freer and more religiously tolerant world," -- statement from House Minority Whip, Roy Blunt (R-MO)

So, off we went ... back onto Capitol Hill for another day of lobbying, post-GPAC. It was to be our private little coup for this new fledgling group if we could actually make something of this. It would be the first legislation that was inclusive of transgender - and a bill that was international in scope at that!

Sarah Fox remembered it as follows: "In 1999, [House Representatives] Lantos, [Bill] Delahunt (D-MA), and [Barney] Frank (D-MA) were the three primary supporters of the inclusion of anti-GLBT incidents in the State Dept's annual report to Congress on international human rights abuses. Of these, Lantos was squarely behind inclusion of the T, and not just the GLB. At that time (and I believe still), the State Dept. had been directed by Congress to prepare an annual human rights abuse report, which would document abuses based on many attributes not including sexual orientation or gender identity. Although the State Department did report many anti-GLBT incidents voluntarily, their coverage was very spotty, as they were under no direct mandate to include this class of abuses.

"At that time, Lantos was the ranking (D) member of the International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee. Of the above-mentioned three (Lantos, Delahunt, and Frank), he was the only one serving on the International Relations Committee at all. Thus you could easily say that he was far and away Congress' strongest and most vocal proponent of mandating T* and GLBT international human rights abuse reporting by the State Department."

"Congressman Lantos went about his work with a dignity and a seriousness that transcended politics ...

California and the entire nation have lost a remarkable leader today.” -- statement from Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA)

With the GPAC throng departed, there was a distinctly different feel to that day’s visits. There was more of a professional tone from the office staffs, and (at least to me) it felt like we were getting a lot more traction. For as little time as we spent up there on that one day, it actually felt much more productive.

After a visit with Lantos’ office, we hit a surprising number of offices individually. I can’t recall all of the offices we visited, but I do recall stopping in at Arizona Rep. Jim Kolbe’s office (even briefly speaking with him in passing). As it turns out, once the bill was submitted, I believe Kolbe was the only Republican co-sponsor - albeit an openly gay Republican. I also got chance to revisit my congressional office, Bill Archer (R-TX), who disappointingly stated they wouldn’t support it as Archer breezed through the reception area and glared at me. But then, Sarah herself was irked by a rejection from William Jefferson, a democrat from New Orleans. We both had wins and losses.

We took Thursday off and did the tourist thing: visiting some of the sights in Washington and even taking a tour of the White House. I actually had a lot of fun palling around with Sarah that day, but we probably missed an opportunity to make a bigger impact on what became a historic proposal, though sadly never voted upon.

As fate turned out, shortly before NTAC’s inaugural seating of its board of directors, the Lantos-authored bill was submitted and referred to the International Relations Committee. It must be noted that even with the gender identity inclusive language (which neither Barney Frank, nor the Human Rights Campaign supported in domestic legislation), that one of the co-sponsors was Frank himself, and one of the organizations endorsing this bill was HRC! It didn’t go unnoticed by NTAC.

It was something I made points with in an NTAC / HRC meeting back in March of 2000 with myself, Michael Gray and Alex Fox visiting Nancy Buermeyer, Tony Varona and Kevin Layton. After the initial board meeting with NTAC in May, both Kathy Padilla and I went up to the Hill and used it in passing as reasoning for gender identity inclusion in the Hate Crimes Bill in office visits with staff of Senators Hatch, Smith, Thurmond, Kennedy and a most frustrating visit with Jeffords’ legislative director (who referred us back to HRC to work with them on this).

“Mr. Speaker, I would like to call the attention of my colleagues to the global persecution of individuals based on their sexual orientation. Yesterday, I chaired a briefing of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on this alarming situation. Mr. Speaker, I am especially grateful for the support and the participation of our distinguished colleagues, Congressman Benjamin Gilman, Congressman Barney Frank, Congressman William Delahunt, and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. I initiated yesterday’s Caucus briefing because of alarming reports about the ongoing persecution of individuals based solely on their sexual orientation. These unacceptable violations of human rights have included arbitrary arrests, rape, torture, imprisonment, extortion and even execution Mr. Speaker, yesterday’s briefing was not a discussion of our own nation’s laws relating to homosexuality, transsexuality, or bisexuality. I have my own well know views on this issue, which I have clearly stated a number of times in the last couple of weeks when the domestic legal implications of these issues have been considered by the House of Representatives....

If a government denies human rights to one group, then it is possible for that government to deny rights to any other group or every group. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in communities all around the world have been brutally punished both physically and mentally for exercising their fundamental human rights to freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of belief. Mr. Speaker, these violations fall squarely within the scope of international human rights laws.” -- Record of 105th Congress of a presentation on the floor of the House of Representatives, Aug. 7, 1998 by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA)

In retrospect, we would’ve been better served lobbying directly for the Lantos-authored legislation over in the House instead of using it as leverage for inclusion in other bills. The Lantos proposal died in sub-committee, never came to public light and nothing ever came of the effort. It was hopeful but also too aggressive of me to think that we could make that immediate leap as I (and many of us) have now learned: the Washington process moves exceedingly slow.

It must be said that Rep. Tom Lantos took a very bold step for the transgender community and demonstrated to many others, both in Congress and even in the GLB political realm, how principle is paramount. Even though it was still the Clinton Administration, it was certainly not a transgender friendly environment at that time. Rep. Lantos was the leader, of whom others would follow. And if not widely missed from other trans folk, Sarah Fox and I will surely miss him.

Thank you Tom Lantos for putting protections for transgenders on the congressional map - and for being a hero.

“Character is doing the right thing when nobody’s looking.” -- African American former congressman, J. C. Watts (R-OK)

“If you knew how happy I was, you would not be sad. I am completely at peace with what I have achieved for my country and my family.” -- Rep. Tom Lantos to his family from his deathbed.

Suggested citation

Marti Abernathy. "Remembering Tom Lantos." TransAdvocate, February 16, 2008.
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