

Gay activists try to keep up with new blood

Wednesday, December 24th, 2008 at 5:59 am

[Originally appeared on <http://why.org/blogs/itsourcity/2008/12/24/gay-activists-try-to-keep-up-with-new-blood/>]

By Ben Bradlow

Amid the hum of skateboard wheels against the concrete of Love Park, about 30 gay activists gathered in the frigid cold on Saturday evening. As one opposite-sex couple tentatively made their way through "We Shall Overcome" and "If I Had a Hammer," others joined in, quickly becoming confident in the spirit of the song though many remained unsure of the words.

"Sometimes people have to be prodded into action, but once they are, really we're an unstoppable force," said Katherine Morris, age 18, from Prospect Park, Penn.

She was one of the first to arrive at the Light Up The Night vigil, which was held in conjunction with similar events all around the country. The program was under the umbrella of a new gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activist organization called [Join the Impact](#), which has had a raised profile in the wake of California's vote to ban gay marriage in approving Proposition 8 on November 4. Long-time observers and activists in the GLBT rights movement wonder whether a new generation of activists emerging after the passage of California's gay marriage ban will actually become the "unstoppable force" that people like Morris claim it is. In Philadelphia, Brandi Fitzgerald, whose day job is at a local big box retailer, has taken the lead in organizing a series of events since November 4. Despite not having ever engaged in any kind of activism before, when she heard about Join the Impact's plan to have rallies in cities across the country, Fitzgerald contacted community leaders and organized a rally at City Hall on November 15 that drew between five and six thousand people - all in six days.

"I don't know, yet, a lot of the gay activists and leaders in the community. I am learning as I go and because I am new to this scene there are some trust issues because people don't know who I am and why all of a sudden do I want to be involved," Fitzgerald said. "I'm reaching out to these people and getting to know them, I hope that they have that faith and trust in me and know that I have no agenda. I'm a retail manager. I don't need fifteen minutes of fame."

The potential for infusion of new blood, and new organizing tactics, has longtime gay activists rushing to keep up, especially as some established groups sustain attacks for not having done enough to campaign against Proposition 8. Bloggers such as Andrew Sullivan, a political commentator who is gay and a writer for The Atlantic magazine, have leveled a series of [attacks](#) against groups like the [Human Rights Campaign](#) for their perceived idleness during the Proposition 8 battle. Mark Segal, editor of the [Philadelphia Gay News](#) laid the blame for the Proposition 8 loss squarely at the feet of the No on Proposition 8 organizers, instead of any national organization like the HRC.

"You can never go into any public election expecting to win. You always expect to lose and fight for your life and they didn't do that. That was a failure there," he said.

Gloria Casarez, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's GLBT liaison, saw the loss for the GLBT rights movement in California as a paradoxical catalyst for inspiration among many activists like Fitzgerald.

"The perspective that Brandi brought to this was that this was really a light bulb moment for her and there are light bulb moments for people who engage in political movements all the time," she said. "Proposition 8 in California, ended up being a light bulb moment for many, many people."

Segal echoed this notion, speculating that the marriage issue could have staying power in the movement.

"There are a lot of young people out there who have seen many of us fight in this movement for years and they have been apathetic or sitting on the sideline and they finally decided they didn't want to do that anymore. There was a mushroom effect happening from California and it went out to the entire country and this became their *cause celebre* and will for a long time," he said.

Judging by the way post-Proposition 8 events have been organized, this "*cause celebre*" will be unique for its technological innovation. Perry Monastero, executive director of the [Delaware Valley Legacy Fund](#), a key GLBT civil rights organization, pointed to Fitzgerald and Join The Impact's use of the internet and social networking tools as being a key innovation in organizing around the same-sex marriage issue.

"I'm guilty as not being as plugged in as many others," he said. "I'm optimistic that folks will begin to open their organizations to new membership and new ways of doing things."

Both Monastero and Fitzgerald will be part of a planned meeting on January 24 where a number of gay activist groups will come together to discuss ways to use technology to better serve the movement. Malcolm Lazin, executive director of the Equality Forum, said his organization is also investing in training for its staff to be

equipped to harness new organizing tools on the Internet. At issue, Casarez and others note, is how to sustain this new energy and determine the agenda for gay activism.

Philadelphia has been a hotbed for gay activism since the early 1960s, Segal said, and is home to many leading national gay activist groups like the Equality Forum.

"A lot of the people who are focused on [Proposition 8] and at the demonstrations are people who are for the first time are becoming gay activists," Segal said. "Many of them had no idea of the knowledge of where the gay community is and what it needs. Marriage is not the number one concern right because not all gay people want to get married. But what all gay people do need is to make sure that they're not discriminated in employment, housing, or public accommodation because that could happen to every single one of us. That's why it's important. That's why the first agenda should be, in this community, to get a non-discrimination bill through Congress."

In private interviews and in her remarks at Saturday's vigil, Fitzgerald was quick to note that she has not personally experienced discrimination because she is gay. The debate between newer activists and longtime organizers appears to be where they see the most significant kind of discrimination: in the workplace and public sphere, or in the benefits accruing to their private relationships. This prioritization is determining whether workplace discrimination and hate crimes legislation take precedence over the marriage issue. Lazin concurred with Segal on the importance of workplace non-discrimination and hate crimes measures, arguing that there is agreement on the gay rights agenda.

"I think in terms of the folks who are involved in political leadership there's consensus in terms of - I don't know anybody who disagrees with it - moving forward with hate crimes and pushing for its passage in 2009. That doesn't mean that people are no longer interested in same-sex marriage equality," he said.

He argued that activists should aim first for the issues that have widespread support. According to a number of recent polls, vast majorities of Americans support the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation. A [Newsweek poll](#) released Dec. 5 showed that 87% of Americans support equal job opportunities for gays and lesbians, while only 39% supported marriage for gays and lesbians. 55% supported "legally-sanctioned unions."

Lazin placed workplace non-discrimination and hate crimes legislation at the top of the list of issues to be addressed in 2009, though he also mentioned the [repeal of the federal Defense of Marriage Act](#), and [Don't Ask Don't Tell](#) as subsequent priorities. As of the middle of last week, Lazin said that he was unaware of any of Fitzgerald's programming since the first Proposition 8 protest at City Hall on November 15, including Saturday's sparsely attended vigil. Fitzgerald, like Lazin and Segal, emphasized a wide range of issues on the gay rights agenda, but argued that same-sex marriage is driving the activist movement.

"I think that if there was any pushback around these protests in Philly, it was because people felt hurt that their issues weren't widely addressed by the same amount of people that are addressing this gay marriage issue. I think that in the big picture, gay marriage is going to fuel this movement going forward, and going to encourage people to get involved in community and all the causes that need attention. I guess I look at it as a catalyst to change happening across the board," she said.

Ben Bradlow is a recent graduate of Swarthmore College and is currently an intern with WHY.