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In this March 26, 2007 photo, Andrew Chapin of New York City takes part in a rally on Capitol Hill in Washington supporting legislative efforts to repeal the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy regarding gay soldiers. Photo by AP Images/Susan Walsh.

Are We Making Progress? Reflections on the LGBTQ Movement, Social Justice and Philanthropy

As a national philanthropic organization that has spent the last 27 years raising awareness about the funding needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) organizations, in 2007 Funders for LGBTQ

Issues changed its mission, making its long-held commitment to social justice explicit. The process that led us to take this step began with two questions that we posed as a part of our strategic planning process: If we say we are a social justice organization, what exactly does that mean? And, is all LGBTQ work synonymous with social justice?

Funders for LGBTQ Issues was founded by grantmakers in 1982 to address the lack of foundation support for lesbian and gay issues in the U.S

By Karen Zelermyer

(awareness about the realities of bisexual, transgender and queer communities was minimal at this point). The 1980s was a time of burgeoning growth for the lesbian and gay movement. Dozens of organizations and groups were being created every year to address the issues impacting our community, including civil rights organizations, community centers, health clinics, anti-violence projects, (continued on page 8)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Advancing the LGBTQ Movement and Social Justice *(continued from page 1)*

hotlines, arts organizations, film festivals and social support groups. There were no laws protecting the rights of LGBTQ people in the workplace; gays were not allowed to serve in the military; and the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the right of states to make the sex lives of LGBTQ people illegal. There were no positive portrayals of gay men or lesbians in the media. The times were framed, first and foremost, by the growing AIDS epidemic – frequently referred to as the “gay disease” – and the desperate need to secure treatment and research.

Within the world of philanthropy, there was a small handful of nascent public lesbian and gay foundations (most notably Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, based in New York City, and Horizons Foundations, based in San Francisco) and one private

foundation (the Chicago Resource Center) that supported gay and lesbian issues. A few other foundations were making small grants to gay and lesbian groups but they did not mention it in any of their written materials. There had never been any programming at the Council on Foundations or at Affinity Group meetings. Gay and lesbian people were not included in The Foundation Center’s grants taxonomy. We were virtually invisible within mainstream philanthropy.

Since those years, the LGBTQ movement has made considerable progress in its quest for equality and acceptance. According to recent polls, 75 percent of Americans now support the idea of same-sex relationship recognition, 69 percent oppose laws that prevent qualified LGBTQ people from adopting children,

64 percent favor allowing openly gay military personnel to serve in the armed forces, and 19 percent report that their feelings toward gays and lesbians have become more favorable over the past five years.

These encouraging cultural shifts have been accompanied by an inconsistent patchwork of federal and state laws and regulations, some of which have affirmed the rights of LGBTQ people and others that, in contrast, deny their rights and undermine their safety.

In almost all of the battles currently being waged to

secure the rights and safety of LGBTQ people, there are both good news and bad news. There also is an incredible array of LGBTQ and ally organizations, grassroots activists and funders that have worked to affect change. As a result of all this work, today:

- Eighteen states recognize LGBTQ relationships either through marriage, civil unions or domestic partnership laws. The bad news is that 32 states do not legally recognize the relationships of same-sex couples and the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which allows states to define marriage as a union specifically between one man and one woman, cements this inequity.
- Congress is considering a fully inclusive Employment Non Discrimination Act (ENDA) that would prevent someone from being fired because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. However, until such a law is passed, transgender people are at risk of losing their jobs in 38 states and LGB people are at risk in 29 states.
- The Matthew Shepard Act, which would extend hate crime legislation to cover sexual orientation and gender identity, is awaiting a Senate vote. In the meantime, bias-related murders of LGBTQ people are at their highest rate since 1999.
- More than 13,000 LGBTQ service members have been discharged from the U.S. military under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” as the LGBTQ community and our allies organize for its promised repeal.

We also have made progress within philanthropy. Our annual research has tracked grants to LGBTQ populations from more than 300 U.S.-based private, public, community and corporate foundations. The Council on Foundations is led by a gay man. The Foundation Center includes LGBTQ in its taxonomy



Two young protesters with their mothers during a gay rights rally in Hollywood on May 26, 2009.

of grants. And, there is a vibrant network of public and private LGBTQ foundations that have played an important role in supporting the communities, activists and organizations working on all of the efforts mentioned above.

Unfortunately, all of this progress has not resulted in a larger piece of the philanthropic pie for LGBTQ populations and issues. Our research reveals that LGBTQ issues receive less than 0.02 percent of all foundation dollars, approximately the same percentage it was receiving in 1989 when The Foundation Center began tracking these issues. Further, the primary reason that LGBTQ foundation giving has kept pace with the overall growth in giving is due to a handful of private foundations that were established by gay men over the last decade. Too few of our country's more than 70,000 foundations support our communities.

As the sector has shifted, so has our organization. In our first two decades of existence, Funders for LGBTQ Issues work was grounded in two assumptions. The first was that if we empowered LGBTQ people and communities, they would be able to organize themselves to change the world around them. The second was that the world would be more fair and just if resources were distributed equitably.

Working from these assumptions, we advocated for the hiring of LGBTQ people in foundations, produced issue-based reports and organized gatherings for grantmakers. We also worked to persuade specific foundations to fund LGBTQ organizations where we saw an opening, based on a supportive leader or what seemed to be an obvious link between our issues and the issues they funded. We expected that the ultimate outcome of these strategies would be more money from more foundations being directed to LGBTQ issues and populations.

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For more than two decades, Funders for LGBTQ Issues employed these strategies to advance our cause. And, by many measures, we were successful. There is now a much greater awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ issues both within philanthropy and among the general public. There also are many more foundations and grants being directed to LGBTQ issues and many more “out” LGBTQ people working in foundations. While we never would claim sole credit for these shifts, we are confident that our work made a valuable contribution.

Over time, however, we became increasingly (and painfully) aware of some huge shortcomings in the LGBTQ movement and its organizational infrastructure. We know that the leadership of almost all of the national and statewide LGBTQ organizations, including our own LGBTQ foundations, is predominantly white. We also know that transgender and gender nonconforming people have almost no role in the decision making and leadership

of these institutions. And, we know from our own research that autonomous LGBTQ people of color organizations receive little or no foundation support, and are forced to survive with budgets under \$50,000 and no paid staff.

Our failure to build an inclusive LGBTQ movement led us to see the limitations of our guiding frameworks and strategies. Three primary factors informed our thinking. The first was a growing body of knowledge being produced by many critical race theorists and LGBTQ people of color activists, arguing that the path to justice must involve deep structural and institutional changes, and by feminists addressing the importance of working from an intersectional, gender justice perspective.

The second factor was our own research, which revealed that LGBTQ-targeted funding was not reaching the most marginalized within our community: LGBTQ people of color, transgender and gender nonconforming people, lesbians, and LGBTQ people living in poverty.

The third factor was the persistent advocacy and activism of LGBTQ people of color and transgender and gender nonconforming people. Increasingly, our field was being challenged to think about the ways in which its visions included a racial equity lens and a trans-inclusive lens—foundations were no exception.

These lessons led us to the realization that the once effective strategies – given the context in which we were working in the 1980s and 1990s – were no longer applicable. We needed to identify new, more effective frameworks and strategies to address the current realities.

The results? A mission that grounds LGBTQ issues within a broader framework of racial, gender and economic justice and the programs to match it. More importantly, we are guided by an overriding belief that we cannot attain our rights if they remain separate from the rights of all marginalized people.

Today, Funders for LGBTQ Issues has a number of new program areas intended to bring our vision into practice. The LGBTQ Racial Equity Campaign works at the intersection of LGBTQ rights and racial equity to better support LGBTQ communities of color. Common Vision works with two learning cohorts of foundations to strengthen grantmaking practices grounded in a structural transformation framework. And, we work to position our staff and board members strategically in philanthropic efforts that have the potential to advance our mission.

We also continue to produce research, build resources and organize gatherings. In late October, we will release a landmark web site – www.lgbtraciaequity.org – that compiles funder tools, perspectives from the field and resources to support grantmakers in addressing the racial inequities facing LGBTQ communities. And, our current web site – www.lgbtfunders.org – continues to house searchable directories of LGBTQ grantmakers and organizations, as well as various cutting-edge reports including *Global Gaze: LGBTI Grantmaking in the Global South and East*, *Building Communities: Autonomous LGBTQ People of Color Organizations in the US*, our annual *LGBTQ Grantmaking by US Foundations* report, and other publications related to LGBTQ funding.

Nearly three decades after our founding, I am encouraged by the current level of commitment from so many leaders in the field who share our desire to explore new opportunities for alliance building and new organizational models for working intersectionally. Together, we have the potential to advance social justice beyond what's possible working alone. It's not easy, but given the complex challenges facing our world, do we have an alternative? ■

Karen Zelermyer is executive director of Funders for LGBTQ Issues.

(continued from page 4) difficult. If boards want to appoint leaders who are celebrities and peers of themselves and other leaders – and that pool is 82.1 percent white men – then it's little wonder that so few recent appointments buck the trend. I suppose it is a matter of chicken-and-egg with respect to breaking the cycle – that is, one cannot draw diversity from a pool that is not diverse – but in 2009, when women dominate the nonprofit workforce and academic achievement levels of women and people of color have never been higher, something other than the numbers must tell the story. Our first-hand experience really does suggest that the culprit is psychological rather than statistical.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

In the face of such powerful forces, supported by a long history, courage is necessary to break the cycle. The

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courage needed here is not hard. It requires taking an authentic, reasoned look at an organization's path to impact and need for leadership. It means looking carefully at a variety of networks, and evaluating candidates on their track records of achievement and management. It means having compensation reflect the intrinsic value of the role, rather than serving as an allure or gatekeeper. All of these are part of the regular, day-to-day business of organizational governance and management. Most of all, it requires challenging our assumptions of what leadership truly is, rather than what we think it is or what we've been taught it is.

In an increasingly diverse society and world, foundations matter more than ever, leadership matters more than ever, and diversity does as well. In light of its work, this field might have a special opportunity to break the cycle. Foundations exist outside the private marketplace. Public goods routinely are developed and supported by foundations. Perhaps diversity and leadership are two public goods for which foundations can pick up the tab, simply by changing attitudes and practices. If last year's presidential campaign teaches us anything, it's that change can happen, and can happen quickly. ■

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NOTES

1. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).
2. Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good To Great* (New York, Harper Collins, 2005)