

Heroes & Villains

R.U.1.2? Queer Community Dinner Raises Dough NGLTF's Matt Foreman Warns of Anti-Gay Threats

BY EUAN BEAR

The heroes were the 250-plus diners at the Wyndham Hotel who emptied their checkbooks for silent auction items ranging from a Burton snowboard to a half-page ad in the Burlington *Free Press*, from hand knit or woven wearables to massage and chiropractic sessions, from artwork to concert tickets to overnights at B&Bs. R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center Board Chairwoman Cathy Resmer said the Center realized nearly \$10,000 from the auction, the dinner, sales of table centerpieces, and pledges and donations for the "furniture fund."

There were more heroes in the celebration of community volunteers. R.U.1.2? co-founder Don Eggert was awarded special recognition for his five years of service to the Center – an unlooked-for acknowledgment that clearly choked him up, until a sympathetic diner offered up his full water glass. Center Executive Director Christopher Kaufman called Eggert the one "without whom nothing."

And the Volunteer of the Year award went to Dick Haas of the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont. Haas, whose dedication and contributions were outlined by Project program director Glen Johnson, has been volunteering five to six hours a week for 11 years in the unglamorous job of maintaining donor databases with thousands of contacts. "I went to a postal service bulk mailing training," Johnson said, "and they all knew Dick's work because our database was so clean."

Haas thanked the person he said is his best friend, who had stood behind him for 33 years: his partner Howard Graff.

There were more villains than heroes in the outline of national challenges by keynote speaker Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, with Vermont a lone bright spot in a litany of oncoming trouble for LGBT communities nationwide.

He was, he said, "honored and privileged to be in the presence of so many people who fought and worked so hard for so many years, ... who four years ago this month, achieved what was deemed impossible – civil unions – full equality for our families under state law.

"In fact, to this day, you remain the only LGBT community in the nation that has stood up to, fought against, and defeated a pitched assault by the right to push back and

overturn a court decision declaring that failure to recognize our relationships violates basic constitutional principles.

"For these reasons," he continued, "I feel a little embarrassed to be talking about the threats our national community is facing, the battles in which we are engaged, or about the viciousness and tactics of our opponents. You know all of this, you've lived through it, and every LGBT person in America owes an extraordinary debt you, our Vermont heroes, for persevering against extraordinary odds."

Foreman went on to name those vicious opponents, the villains of the piece, who, he said, were well-funded and ruthless: Focus on the Family, Traditional Values Coalition, and Concerned Women for America.

The dinner speech marked Foreman's first time in Burlington, he said in an interview before the evening's event. What makes Vermont's experience special, he said, was that the community "came out the other side intact." In other parts of the country, he explained, where anti-gay ballot measures have been fought – including state DOMA legislation – the community has emerged "bitterly divided and hopelessly worn out. Here, the community seems intact and you're moving forward," as shown by the growth of R.U.1.2?, among other indicators. If even 25 percent of the struggles elsewhere do as well as Vermont, he added, that would be a huge step forward.

In the interview and later in his speech, Foreman pointed to the "lesson of Vermont" for other communities: "There is no substitute for face-to-face community work." He cited the years of Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force presence at county fairs, and speakers taking heat from hostile gatherings at mainstream church, club, and association meetings.

"The big challenge is the recognition that all politics is local. The money in our community all flows toward Washington DC," he said in the interview, "despite 30 years of zero action." Foreman charged that the big LGBT organization donors are "obsessed with 'glamour' and seeing big-name politicians at their fund-raising dinners," citing "Hilary" and "Chuck" (New York Senators Hilary Rodham Clinton and Charles Schumer) as examples. In the meantime, neither Senator has expressed more than token opposition to the federal marriage amendment that would, if ratified, embed discrimination against same-sex couples in the U.S. Constitution. Foreman also put California Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein in the same category for failing to say they would

oppose any anti-gay marriage amendment. "If our so-called friends can't stand with us ..."

The marriage amendment, he added, is being effectively used as a wedge to defeat state and local politicians who are either moderate or pro-LGBT issues, especially in African American churches. "All they have to do is wedge or depress 2 percent of the African American vote and a Democrat can't win. That's how closely we're divided in this country."

But, Foreman said in the interview, the ploy won't work, because in mainstream America, the top issues are healthcare, jobs, war, and terrorism. "This [marriage amendment] tactic is evil – it's Willie Horton all over again, only this time we're Willie Horton."

Foreman has been with partner Francisco DeLeon for 14 years, and the two are "floating between New York," where Foreman

riage constitutional amendment, unlike state DOMA laws, which can be challenged in court.

"Whoever's in the White House, we have to advance a new agenda. Congress will be controlled by Republicans – or rather by anti-gay forces," Foreman declared. He stressed the importance of building alliances and relationships with other groups. "Other issues are gay issues. Without allies we won't win on 'our' issues." And there are "more progressive groups coming together than ever before."

Following Foreman, Burlington Mayor and gubernatorial candidate Peter Clavelle said a few words, having arrived late from a campaign event in Bennington. "I'm glad to have gotten here to hear Matt Foreman expose those bigots for what they are," he said, referring to equal marriage opponents.

Clavelle declared that he was proud to be in a state that is "striving to get equal rights" for its citizens and acknowledged that civil unions fall short of full equality, but did not take the opportunity to announce his support for full gay marriage.

Lest he be considered a voice of doom and gloom, two days after the dinner Foreman sent an email response to a question about causes for hope: "There's incredible hope in the amount of grassroots organizing and energy – we haven't seen anything like this

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Matt Foreman

was director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, "and Washington," where many of his duties as director of the NGLTF take him. His family "moved around a lot" but he went to college in West Virginia. He won a scholarship to NYU for law school, but interrupted his studies to go back to West Virginia to come out.

He has a long history of activism, "being a professional homosexual" as he calls it. Foreman was involved with Dignity and Heritage of Pride, and was the executive director of New York's Gay and Lesbian Antiviolence Project, before moving on to direct ESPA.

Asked to gaze into the future, Foreman refused to predict the outcome of the national elections this fall. But, he said, at least three states would likely have constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage. He indicated that some community members aren't taking the state amendments seriously enough: there will be no avenue other than a repeal amendment to challenge a state anti-gay mar-

riage since the peak of the AIDS crisis in the late 80s and early 90s. Even better, there's a genuine wellspring of support from non-LGBT people.

There's also a lot of hope behind the fact that the right has launched anti-marriage legislative initiatives in 29 states this year, and 11 have gone nowhere – including Maine (we've lost in four states and the balance are pending). I think it's clear that in the next 2-3 years, we will have at least five states that recognize same sex marriages, probably as a result of litigation brought by couples married in Canada or Massachusetts.

"But more than anything is the fact that right is on our side. Sooner or later, we will prevail. We all just have to keep fighting with the [same] tenacity [as] our opponents." ▼