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Out at the Democratic National Convention

by Terje Anderson

As the recently elected Democratic National Committeeman from Vermont and as a delegate to this year's Democratic National Platform Committee, I had the privilege of being one of Vermont's representatives at July's National Convention in Atlanta. Conventions are chaotic, crazy, and exhausting: a week of constant meetings and caucuses, receptions and socializing, backroom maneuvering and public posturing, and the spectacle of the convention itself. It is impossible to fully convey the feeling of the Atlanta Convention in a short article, but as a gay male Jackson representative from Vermont, there were many highlights worth sharing.

At every Democratic National Convention, there is a lesbian and gay caucus: this year's had 98 members, the largest ever. The caucus meets daily to plan strategies for gay issues and visibility, and to build ties which will go beyond the convention itself.

This convention marked the highest degree of lesbian and gay visibility on the convention floor itself of any Democratic Convention ever. On Tuesday, the day the Platform was debated and adopted, two openly gay speakers addressed the conven-

tion. State Representative Karen Clark of Minnesota identified herself as a lesbian when she spoke in favor of platform language relating to missile testing. Keith Gann, a Jackson delegate and person with AIDS from Minnesota, presented a summary of the platform language on AIDS, bringing many of the noisy delegates on the convention floor to a halt when he introduced himself as a PWA. His courage and eloquence had a notable impact on many of the delegates in the hall, and is a reminder of the importance of speaking for ourselves in politics, rather than allowing our cause to be carried entirely by supportive straight politicians.

Tuesday night was also the night of Jesse Jackson's speech to the convention, as always, an eloquent and moving call to progressive action by the most gifted orator in American politics. Jackson's speech beautifully wove the concerns of lesbians and gay men into his quilt vision of America: he spoke of our needs for civil rights protections, of being included in his coalition of the excluded, and movingly of his visits to AIDS hospices and support organizations. Never before has lavender shown so clearly as a color of the Rainbow.

Vermont's delegation was chaired by

Ron Squires, a Jackson delegate from Guilford, Vice-Chair of the state Democratic party, and the first openly gay person ever to chair a state delegation at a national convention. He did a fantastic job of keeping the delegation united and friendly, divided as it was evenly between Jackson and Dukakis supporters. His performance impressed many, and helped prove, once more, that it is possible to be openly gay and involved in politics without being one-issue or irrelevant to the process.

To me, as a gay man and an AIDS activist, perhaps the most important symbol of the convention was the overwhelming presence of "Silence=Death" stickers throughout Atlanta and on the convention floor itself. The ACT-UP slogan was plastered across town by AIDS activists who came to the convention from across the country. Thousands of delegates wore the stickers on the convention floor, with many people remarking that, with the exception of the Dukakis and Jackson buttons, it was the most ubiquitous symbol at the convention. That so many straight delegates from throughout the country were willing to wear a pink triangle with a fairly radical slogan told me that we have come a long way in advancing our concerns, especially about AIDS, on the national political consciousness. More importantly, each time a member of the lesbian and gay caucus gave a sticker out to a delegate, we had a chance to explain it to them, to educate, and to make a human connection with someone who helps shape opinion in their community back home: that more than anything, is the job that lesbian and gay delegates at a national convention have.

The Atlanta convention was not a watershed in lesbian and gay politics: no dramatic breakthroughs occurred, no floor fights were won or lost on our issues. The convention was, however, a reminder of our slowly increasing acceptance in politics and, especially, in Democratic party affairs: pledges for protections of our civil rights were included in the party platform and promised by every Democratic presidential candidate, our presence was larger and more visible than ever before, and our own networks and contacts emerged stronger and more unified. There is still a great deal of work to be done before our community's needs are fully addressed by the political structure in this country, but it was a unique pleasure and privilege to be part of that ongoing process.

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