

Task Force announces controversial hiring

by David Stout
Q-Notes Staff

WASHINGTON, DC—On December 6, the Board of Directors of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force announced their intention to name Melinda Paras as the new Executive Director of the organization. The news was met with a mix of positive and negative responses from gay and AIDS activists and could make Paras the most controversial figure ever to head the Task Force, the country's oldest national gay civil rights agency.

Paras, 41, a San Francisco Health Commissioner, was tapped by the Board in September to become the agency's interim Chief Operating Officer and transition team leader for four months of "re-engineering." The focus of Paras' duties was finding a way for the organization to avoid a year-end budget deficit and survive a wave of staff defections, including Executive Director Peri Jude Radecic.

Most of the criticism the Board of Directors has drawn for selecting Paras (pronounced puh-ROSS) involves her past political ties to Marxist organizations and her performance

as the former Deputy Director of the financially mismanaged AIDS service agency, Shanti Project. Others question the incestuous nature of Paras' relationship to Board members and the conspicuous absence of



Melinda Paras

national AIDS organizations from a Task Force press release highlighting agency and individual endorsements of the hiring.

Early Organizing

Paras was raised in Madison, Wisconsin, a college town that is home to the University of Wisconsin. She dropped out of high school to become more involved in local protest movements, such as anti-Vietnam War organizing, and eventually joined a group of Cuban sympathizers called the Venceremos Brigade.

The Brigade traveled to Cuba when Paras was just 16 and she journeyed with them. Brigade members spent their time in the country working with poor and needy citizens. But Paras was favorably struck by aspects of their socialist existence. When asked by *Q-Notes* what she learned about Cuba during her stay, Paras replied, "I learned a lot more about the United States than I learned about Cuba from my trip... In this country health care access is such an issue — the first question is do you have insurance? Do you have money? How much is it going to cost? Who will pay for it? — I was really struck that it was such a non-issue there."

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Gayzing ahead

by Bob Roehr
Special to Q-Notes

The old lavender crystal ball saw things pretty clearly last year, a lot on target and not too many screw ups. After a bit of Windex on a soft rag, this is what we saw for 1995.

Congress

The new Republican majority will be too busy with their "Contract with America" for the first six months to pay much heed to lesbians and gays. Call it benign neglect.

That will change in late summer and fall as appropriations bills move forward. Newt Gingrich and the leadership will allow "no promo homo" amendments to be attached to a few pieces of legislation so that both pro and anti-gay sides can have recorded votes for their Congressional ratings.

None of our "friends" in the Senate will fall on their swords by filibustering to stop anti-gay legislation. The number of such provisions and their impact won't be significantly different from past years.

Gay and lesbian activists will attempt to "out" newly powerful Republican members of Congress, with minimal success. There will be circumstantial evidence but no "smoking gun." Gingrich will say it doesn't matter to him whether or not the member is gay.

AIDS

Research: A theory of endogenous retrovirus as a significant cofactor in the progression of HIV disease to AIDS will become a hot topic of discussion. It will open up new lines of research whose impact will be years in coming.

Clinical trials of protease inhibitors, the next family of HIV anti-virals, will continue to show promise. Access through trials will be expanded but don't look for Food and Drug Administration approval for over the counter use this year.

AIDS Czar: Patsy Fleming will continue to have the personal respect of AIDS activists. But the office is now seen as increasingly irrelevant by most activists because Bill Clinton is unwilling to provide leadership on the issue.

Funding: Liberal allies who delivered increased AIDS dollars in 1994 warned not to expect further increases this year because of the cap on spending imposed by deficit reduction. And that was before the Republican landslide changed control of Congress.

Most AIDS money comes through the Ryan White CARE Act whose five year mandate is about to expire. It had strong bipartisan support in the past and may breeze through again. Much more likely is tough wrangling over sexually explicit materials and revamping the formula on how money is distributed. Those fights won't necessarily be partisan in nature.

A long shot scenario, though one that has grown in the last few weeks, is that Ryan White will simply disappear. AIDS and other earmarked funding would be folded into larger health block grants to states and localities with fewer strings and oversights attached. That would shift the fight for deciding resource allocation from Capitol Hill to fifty state houses.

Gays in the military

Joe Steffan will decide not to appeal his case to the Supreme Court thus seemingly ending the legal maneuvering over the "old" ban on gays in the military.

Keith Meinhold is still in the Navy, having won his case in court under the "old" regulations. The brass will now try to go after him

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AIDS groups plan new lobbying coalition

by David Jones
Q-Notes Staff

RALEIGH—Representatives of over 30 AIDS service organizations have held two meetings to discuss forming a new coalition to lobby in the North Carolina General Assembly. Plans have been made to form a tax-exempt corporation and hire a professional, contract lobbyist in time for the January 25, 1995 legislative session.

Meetings began after a group of AIDS service and care groups began discussing the need for a lobbyist. State groups organized as the North Carolina AIDS Service Coalition were last represented from 1987 through 1989 by this reporter, then Roz Savitt in the 1991 and 1992 legislative sessions. The Coalition disbanded prior to the 1992 legislative session.

Cullen Gurganus, Executive Director of

the AIDS Service Agency (ASA) based in Raleigh, suggested to several activists in late September that an exploratory meeting be held to determine if there was interest in forming a new coalition. Gurganus sent a letter to twelve activists on October 6, 1994, also signed by Ben McFayden of the Triad Health Project in Greensboro, Kimberly Scott of the Eastern NC HIV/AIDS Consortium based in Greenville, Patricia Montgomery of the AIDS Service Agency and this reporter for the UNC Hospitals AIDS Advisory Board of Chapel Hill. The primary objective of the proposed meeting was to determine if others felt that there was enough interest to call a statewide meeting to discuss options. The meeting was held in ASA's offices on October 25, 1994.

Gurganus told the group that ASA received regular inquiries on legislative matters

since it was based in the state capitol, and that the volume of activity indicated a need for some form of formal representation. Those attending agreed that it was essential that community-based HIV/AIDS groups be represented, and that the new state AIDS Advisory Council could not be an effective voice for community groups since it had infrequent meetings and primarily gave advice to state agencies. There was an extended discussion of federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regulations on how much lobbying tax-exempt charities could do. It was agreed that a larger, statewide meeting to continue the discussion was appropriate, and that a major issue for some groups would be how IRS regulations on lobbying might affect their ability to participate. There was also a discussion of the kinds of education programs non-

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Third gay man found dead in Mississippi

WASHINGTON, DC—The body of a third gay man was discovered Sunday, December 11 in Mississippi, just two months after the brutal killings of Robert Walters and Joseph Shoemake in Laurel. The body of Stanley King was discovered near a vacant house in Indianola, MS, approximately 100 miles north of Laurel. Within hours of the discovery, the Sunflower County Sheriff's Department arrested Remus Terrell Wilson, 17, on charges of armed robbery and murder.

The circumstances of the case are strikingly similar to those of the Walters and Shoemake murders. Wilson, an African-American youth, has confessed to the crime and has used the explanation that the victim tried to rape him as justification for the murder.

In a letter sent to Attorney General Janet Reno, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) Executive Director Melinda Paras updated the Department of Justice (DOJ) on the latest killing and reiterated NGLTF's ongoing request for a separate DOJ investigation.

"From our point of view," said Paras, "there is more going on in Mississippi than meets the

eye."

Paras said that she is "greatly distressed" by the developing pattern of deaths in Mississippi and finds it "difficult to imagine that this is merely a coincidence."

In a November 30 response to previous NGLTF requests for DOJ intervention in Mississippi, Assistant Attorney General Deval Patrick wrote that while the DOJ continued to monitor developments related to the murders in Jones County, federal intervention was not possible on the basis of sexual orientation.

"As you know," Patrick wrote, "there are no federal laws providing criminal civil rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation, thus we would not be able to respond on that basis. However, in the event the investigation indicates that existing federal laws might have been violated, we will take appropriate action."

In her response, Paras said, "NGLTF encourages the DOJ to find other grounds for federal intervention. What is important is that gay men are dying and it is time to go in."

Patrick also acknowledged a NGLTF request for a DOJ task force to investigate the rise in hate crimes across the nation. He

called the suggestion a "good one" and pledged to explore the creation of such a commission.

Lesbian and gay activists in Biloxi, MS have since said that they were contacted by local FBI agents and, as a result, have been granted Biloxi police at the G/L Friendly community center. They had previously reported receiving death threats and harassment due to their continued monitoring of the double murder case in Jones County.

On Tuesday, December 20, Jones County Circuit Judge Billy Landrum heard arguments in a pretrial hearing in the case of Marvin McClendon, the 16-year-old African-American arrested for the double murders of Robert Walters and Joseph Shoemake. The county district attorney argued that the sexual orientation of the victims and the results of post-mortem HIV tests should not be admitted as evidence in the January 30 murder trial. Landrum shocked activists in November when he agreed to a motion by the defense attorney to conduct HIV tests on the frozen blood of the victims and to consider the use of those results in court.

In the pretrial hearing, Landrum said he

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