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editor's note

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

A treatise on progressive change for Charlotte's LGBT community

Mecklenburg County moved forward with LGBT-inclusion on Oct. 15, finally adding employee protections on the basis of gender identity and expression eight years after it added similar protections for sexual orientation.

The 6-3 vote is a victory, no doubt.

Advocacy from groups like the Mecklenburg LGBT Political Action Committee (MeckPAC) and from individual members of the community helped mark that achievement.

While it's clear the majority of our leaders understand the need for non-discrimination protections, what also became clear during the meeting was the realization — at least to me — that we still have a long, long way to go before we can say our larger community has been adequately educated on issues affecting LGBT people and, in particular, issues around gender, gender-identity and transgender people.

The causes are many, but chief among them, I believe, has been Charlotte's lack of public dialogue, activism and awareness-building on important LGBT issues. Mecklenburg County commissioners should be applauded for their political courage — for agreeing to take these issues on in public votes at the dais. Public votes by elected officials create opportunities for the community to engage in dialogue. Yes, sometimes those conversations are harsh and rough. We witnessed as much on Oct. 15, as slurs and insinuations flew from our opponents and even friendly and well-intentioned leaders used phrases like "lifestyle" or honestly questioned what it really is to be transgender as sponsors of the policy revision struggled to give even the most basic of responses. (A friend said the debate contained some of the most discriminatory language he had ever heard.) The same level of conversation has not happened at City Council, where we've missed at least two opportunities to have important public dialogue on issues like employment protections for sexual orientation and gender identity. I've long pushed for Council to vote publicly from the dais on issues like these.

But, conversation can do more than change policies; it can change culture. We may be making significant policy progress, but movement for our local political and social culture has been stalled for quite a long time. It will never move again, or if it does, only very slowly if we don't begin to engage in the kinds of dialogue, education, activism, advocacy and reconciliation that are important tools to shape and change culture.

On this journey toward conversation and education, I believe we must begin to understand concretely several important concepts and begin to undertake several important initiatives. Some ideas to get us started listed below. It's lengthy, but it's important, so I hope you'll stick through it.

Reality, not fantasy

First and foremost, we must fully invest ourselves in reality and stop this fantasy-thinking that allows us to pretend that Charlotte is something it's not. We're making progress, sure, but that progress, at least at the city level, has only been mostly achieved in the past four years. That's not a shining history of progressive political leadership and courage.

We must understand the true, unvarnished, unbiased and un-whitewashed history of our

local LGBT and larger Civil Rights Movement. LGBT advocacy in Charlotte has been a hard road — one for which we've been judged harshly, even as recently as last year (think: 1996 and "Angels in America"). The harsh reality is that the larger Charlotte community really isn't a "progressive" place. What seems like "progressive" culture is merely the deceptive veil of a conservative laissez-faire mindset — you do your thing, I'll do mine. That's great, until folks start thinking their thing is discriminating against and silencing others.

We and our surrounding suburbs are the home of Billy Graham, the president of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, the speaker of a reactionary, anti-LGBT and racist North Carolina House of Representatives, an internationally-known anti-gay leader who counts among his associates a radical evangelical who advocated anti-gay genocide in Uganda, a local base of followers (including elected leaders) who revere a national hate group and religious leader who calls gays "beasts" and Jews "Satanic" and too many other anti-gay churches and leaders to count.

We are also the home of leaders like Bill "Your son's a homo?" James and Karen "Gay Bowel Syndrome" Bentley. We often laugh at their throwback bigotry. But, dear friends, your neighbors have elected them to office; what does that say about how they view you? Don't think for an instance these all-too-present and all-too-vocal anti-LGBT leaders and organizations don't have an effect on LGBT people's lives — legally, economically, socially, religiously and more. They do, every day, mostly lived out silently by people who, unlike me and other mostly white, mostly male LGBT leaders, don't have the privilege of voice, leadership and status.

Civic engagement

The work of changing political and social culture cannot rest with one organization alone. Since the late-1990s, MeckPAC and its volunteer members have worked hard to move our city and county forward. Where they have fallen short is in lobbying and education — a failure for which we can hardly blame them. Lobbying and education is hard work and it's probably best if it's full-time and paid. But, we don't have that luxury here. If we seek to truly change local culture, local LGBT organizations will have to unite and rally. Non-profit organizations that purport to lead our community must put aside their irrational fear of the "political" and engage themselves when necessary and appropriate in civic conversations for change, working publicly, strategically and collaboratively with MeckPAC.

Intentional inclusion

LGBT organizations in Charlotte have done a phenomenal job at including and welcoming transgender members of the community. I'd dare say that we've done better than other LGBT communities across the state and nation. Yet, we lack visibility from transgender people in the leadership of our community. A handful of names rise to the top — the late Pamela Jones, activist Janice Covington, current LGBT Community Center Chair Roberta Dunn. But, we need more. Just as we hope that LGB leadership reflects a diversity of age, gender and

race, we must work to ensure that a diversity of transgender people are represented among our organizations' leadership ranks. Where are our trans people of color, trans men, and trans youth? We must work with intention in our inclusion efforts; many of us, myself included, have failed in some way, in some organization, in some activity as we watched a room full of mostly white gay men make decisions on behalf of others. That will no longer do. It's not enough to say, "We are here, so come and join us." We must reach out. We must engage. We must create spaces where new voices are welcome, not shunned and shut out.

Self education

We must educate ourselves. It is fully irrational that we would expect straight allies — not even to mention our opponents — to understand the complexities of LGBT people's lives and needs while many of us still do not understand these concepts ourselves. We must commit to providing members of our own community opportunities to learn more about ourselves and our LGBT siblings. It's outrageous that longstanding leaders of our community would ask people like me and others to explain to them concepts like queer identity and the existence of intersex people or that longstanding leaders never recognized the harm that might be done when straight allies — not LGBT people themselves — lead our movement and give it their — not our — direction. (For a primer understanding of the harm that can come from "moderate" and not-fully-invested allies of minorities, read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and pay particular attention to his remarks on "the white moderate.")

These concepts are important and we can't teach others without understanding them ourselves. Non-profit groups should commit themselves to educating their boards and their staffs. They should attend conferences like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change, plan more conferences and trainings like the recent Carolina Conference on Queer Youth or Campus Pride's Stop The Hate Trainings and host professional LGBT organizers and educators for panels, lectures and trainings that are publicized and open to the community.

Advocacy, but also activism

We must learn that activism and advocacy are not one in the same. They are different, in both scope and effect, and each have their place and their purpose. We have advocacy in Charlotte, but we lack significant activism that can shape and mold public conversation. The same non-profits and leaders who must put aside their fear of "politics" must also make room to support and encourage grassroots activism, direct action, civil disobedience, youth organizing and more.

Becoming allies

We must be allies, instead of only seeking allies. The same leaders and organizations that oppose LGB equality, also oppose equality for transgender people, people of color, immigrants and women. Just imagine how truly progressive Charlotte could be if our LGBT community began to work hand-in-hand with our natural, progressive allies, not only for our issues but also for theirs. Our community missed an opportune moment to lead with our allies in December 2009, when Bill James struck out with some of his worst bigotry, attacking gays, people living with HIV/AIDS and African-Americans. With the notable exception of two organizations,

see *Editor's on 5*