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editor's note
by matt comer
matt@goqnotes.com

Charlotte leadership: Curiously silent

Curiously silent. That's what describes the Charlotte LGBT community's official response to Republican Mecklenburg County Commissioner Bill James — the Queen City's own modern day Jesse Helms, albeit a less politically savvy and successful one.

James had a serious bout of diarrhea of the mouth in mid-December. First, he called a fellow commissioner's deceased son a "homo." Then, he refused to apologize and further tore at the open wound by calling gays dangerous, sick and destructive. To cap it all off, he said police were undertaking public park sex stings in an effort to "de-infest" us.

And the outrage from Charlotte LGBT leadership was...non-existent. Nothing. Nada. Zip.

Actually, I'm being just a bit disingenuous. Perhaps I've over-exaggerated — "nada" isn't exactly accurate. To their credit, two LGBT organizations responded with a joint statement to media. The national, Charlotte-based Campus Pride and local Time Out Youth called for James to apologize and demanded an immediate reprimand from the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners. Their statement alone, however, made not a dent of difference in media coverage of the incidents. Campus Pride's and Time Out Youth's statement should have been echoed by every LGBT group in the city.

The official silence from Charlotte's largest LGBT groups — like the Lesbian & Gay Community Center, Mecklenburg Gay and Lesbian Political Action Committee (MeckPAC), the Charlotte Business Guild, PFLAG and others — represented more than a serious lack in judgment. Their unwillingness to act on, or, perhaps, their complete ignorance of, the situation was a lost opportunity to build bridges with progressive allies across racial, sexual, health, political

and religious lines.

James not only offended LGBTs in his statements and slurs. He targeted an African-American commissioner. He targeted her deceased son — a gay, African-American man who died from AIDS.

Imagine if our community's leadership had stepped up to the plate with a coalition of LGBT leaders, African-American community leaders, execs from local AIDS service organizations, LGBT-affirming religious leaders and representatives from local progressive activist groups. What if they had all spoken out together to denounce James' harmful and bigoted remarks, offer accurate legal information opposing James' absurd interpretation of *Lawrence v. Texas* and state law, and be the voice of those who all-too-often go unrecognized, oppressed and silenced?

Whether the issues to be addressed in this embarrassing situation were racism, HIV/AIDS stigmatization, religion-based bigotry or outright hatred of LGBT people, the intersections of oppression and these various communities' struggles for liberty, equality and dignity were clear.

The truth is our community's leadership dropped the ball and missed an all-too-rare chance to lead our current and potential allies in educating the public by responding to, rebuking and correcting James' derogatory and incendiary rhetoric.

I have no doubt our community is moving forward with the passage of pro-equality policies at the county-level. Hopefully soon, the city will move on similar issues. Regardless, we must recognize that policy changes alone will not create a better, more equal or more just society for the LGBT citizens and youth of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Until our community's leadership decides to take vocal and visible action on our issues and be our proud voice to the people and voters of our local communities, we will remain mired in a city and county full of unchanged minds and cold, hardened hearts. Unfortunately, LGBT youth will bear the burden of our community's decisions and the actions of civic leaders like James. At least two of our local organizations recognize this. What could we achieve if the others took it as seriously? :

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