

Progressives converge on Atlanta

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Minnesota, were able to harness the power of the faith networks like never before," she said. "We dispelled the myth of gays vs. African-Americans. We really tapped into an especially huge campus system in North Carolina to get young people out to vote like never before."

Though North Carolina lost, organizers here learned important lessons, she said. That loss, however, has reinforced negative stereotypes about the South.

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"I still don't think national LGBT organizations appreciate the unique challenges of organizing in the South," said Equality North Carolina Executive Director Stuart Campbell. "Many still write-off the South, but the tide is turning."

Campbell cited Republican-led Virginia state Senate's recent passage of employment protections on the basis of sexual orientation.

"Virginia shows there are opportunities for the South to take important strides toward equality," Stuart said.

The conference had a strong showing of southern attendees, likely bolstered by its location in Atlanta and the active nature of the local host committee. But, Sarah Reece, director of the Task Force's Academy for Leadership and Action, said the large showing might also be a result of other factors.

"A big piece of it is what is already happening on the ground in a host city or a region when Creating Change comes to town and the moment in the movement where we are," Reece said in an interview via telephone the week after the conference. "You put all that together, shake it up and have a Creating Change and you're going to get the results of that."

In addition to dozens of conference participants from North and South Carolina, regional groups like Southerners on New Ground (SONG) were present. The Atlanta-

based SONG kicked off their weekend of activities at the conference with a session on southern organizing.

"There is time now for us to build a southern freedom movement, given the shifting landscape in the South and in the country," SONG Senior Strategist Kai Lumumba Barrow, of Durham, told a crowd of more than 50 participants gathered for their session the South, politics, sex and god.

"We work in a place — this region, this land, this culture — that has a legacy of both slavery and the most extraordinary civil rights resistance movement," SONG Senior Strategist Suzanne Pharr told a room of more than 50 session participants. "We live in a place you could say is a place of contradiction, but in some ways it isn't because both of those connect to each other. There are not good or bad guys. This is a complexity we live every day."

Reece said The Task Force agrees: It's keenly aware of the South's special place in progressive politics.

"The Task Force has been the progressive voice for the LGBT community and has striven to be the LGBT voice of the progressive community," she said. In their work, The Task Force, like SONG and other southern regional groups, have attempted to highlight the intersections between issues like LGBT rights, immigration rights and reproductive choice.

"It hits a different note when you have this conversation in the South, which has been used as the training ground for the rightwing opposition over the years," Reece said. "You're having this conversation about these intersections in the place in the country where people have lived the intersections and taught the rest of the country what it means to live in these intersections and organize at the intersections."

Equality North Carolina's Church thinks it's time for organizations, activists, bloggers and others to take notice of the South.

"A lot of people have this mentality of 'Oh, well, that's the South,'" Church said. "But, organizing in the South is unique. It's special to me personally because this is our home. The options are either be complacent and live your life going through the moves or do something about it."

More people are getting involved, Church said. Change is happening.

Reece recognizes that progress can be viewed through different lenses.

"Red, blue or purple — what does your state look like? The South can get a bad wrap at times when you see a slew of red," she said. "There is progress being made in the South all the time. If we just look at the narrow definition of progress just by looking at the make-up of legislatures [then] we don't lift up and look underneath and see the great work organizations like Southerners on New Ground and Highlander Center are doing to make progress every day."

The message throughout the conference from southern attendees was one of strength and perseverance. Equality North Carolina's Jones thinks southern history prepares southern organizers for political and social justice achievements that are often harder to win in the South. Those lessons are important for others across the country as well.

"There has to be a realization that if we're going to get the Employment Non-Discrimination Act or marriage equality or safe schools in other states without it, then we have to apply lessons the South has been learning decades longer than the rest of the country," Jones said. "Specifically, that's perseverance ... [and] a narrative of learned lessons of working together against oppressive forces and of marginalized groups forming civil rights movements."

Organizers at The Task Force know there is more work to be done.

"Last year was not a win for everyone in our community," Reece said, noting losses on topics ranging from immigration and reproductive rights to the death penalty and non-discrimination laws. "We have to be ever-vigilant in making sure we are doing the good and hard work of one-on-one relationship building to tell our personal stories and built a climate of changing hearts and minds. The lesson we can take from the South — it is about how we treat each other. Even though policy change is happening we know that it doesn't translate into culture change fast enough for it to always matter in people's daily lives. As [Task Force Executive Director] Rea Carey said at Creating Change, the work is not over and there is still work to be done." : :

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