

# The southern frontier

LGBT and progressive organizing in the South highlighted at this year's Creating Change conference

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com

[Ed. Note — Our editor, Matt Comer, recently spent five days in Atlanta covering the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference. His interviews with some leaders at the conference appear in the follow-up report below.]

ATLANTA — Staffers with North Carolina's statewide equality organization were in force at this year's Creating Change, the annual conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Equality North Carolina staffers said they had been

heartened by what seemed like a growing attention among organizers and attendees of the event to issues of progressive and LGBT organizing in the South.

"I don't know if it was intentional having this conference in the South or in Atlanta, but certainly there's been a message that not only can we not abandon the South, but the South is the new gay frontier in terms of rural organizing and in communities of color and bringing them together through faith networks," said Equality North Carolina Communications Director Jen Jones, who is attending the conference with three other staffers from the group.

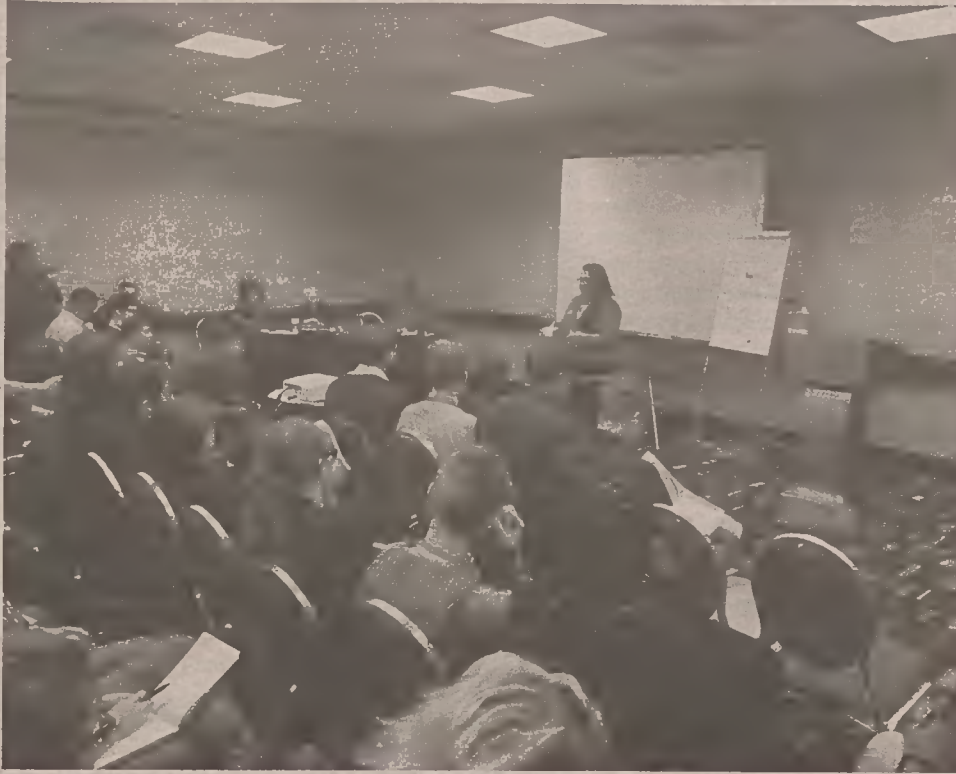
The conference, the largest national gathering of LGBT activists and organizers, was held in late January and came nearly three months after November's marriage equality victories in Maine, Maryland and Washington. In Minnesota, voters rejected an anti-LGBT state constitutional amendment banning marriage recognition.

"The fact that the conference is in Atlanta makes a big statement, especially coming off the marriage wins in the rest of the country," said Ben Church, Equality North Carolina's new deputy director of organizing. "To have the conference in the heart of the South seems intentional and really positive."

Jones thinks the lessons learned from last May's amendment campaign in North Carolina helped shape the four later campaigns.

"We really, even before Maryland and

see *Progressives* on 10



Southerners on New Ground Co-Director Paulina Helm-Hernandez, of Atlanta, discusses the importance of intersectional work among LGBT and immigrant communities in Georgia. File Photo.

## Brief nod to gays in 'State of City'

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CHARLOTTE — Mayor Anthony Foxx gave his annual State of the City address on Feb. 4, hitting hard on a variety of local topics including the controversial streetcar project and other infrastructure needs.

The mayor, a Democrat, also included a brief mention of the gay community, following in the footsteps of President Barack Obama, who became the first president to address the LGBT community in an inaugural address.

"As your mayor, I serve the most diverse citizenry in our history — Republicans, Independents and Democrats, the young and old, Hispanics and Asians, blacks and whites, the rich, poor and middle-class, straight and gay, people from every walk of life you can imagine," Foxx said according to prepared remarks later released to media. "My charge — our charge as a Charlotte City Council — is to ensure that every man, woman and child has a chance to succeed, to fulfill what their talents and abilities can lead them to accomplish."

Representatives of the Mecklenburg LGBT Political Action Committee (MeckPAC) said

they were encouraged by the mayor's remarks.

"Mayor Foxx recognizes what comprises a diverse community and he recognizes that the gay community (including the transgender community) is part of that diversity," MeckPAC Chair Scott Bishop said via email.

The City of Charlotte has taken recent steps to become more LGBT inclusive. In 2010, now-retired City Manager Curt Walton added sexual orientation to the city's non-discrimination policy. In December, before his retirement, he also added protections for transgender workers. The City Council also approved a budget last year including health and other benefits for same-sex partners of city employees.

Bishop said Foxx "consistently has an



Charlotte Mayor Anthony Foxx delivers his state of the city address on Monday, Feb. 4, 2013.

Photo Credit: Charlotte Observer — Jeff Siner, jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

ear for the LGBT community and encourages us to advance change for the community in Charlotte." He said the mayor fully supported anti-discrimination efforts and the addition of domestic partner benefits.

## Org ceases operations

by Matt Comer  
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CHARLOTTE — The founder of a new non-profit organization formed to work with young adults has said his group is ceasing operations after scrutiny from this newspaper and others.

"Envy My Illumination and Realize Excellence" House (EMIRE House) was established in 2012 by Charlotte's Brian Brigham, who said he wanted to help young people ages 18-26 create lives free from drugs, alcohol and crime. His project would have provided housing and support.

An investigation by *qnotes* found that Brigham, a registered sex offender, had been indicted by a South Carolina federal court on three separate child sex offenses. In April 1999, he pleaded guilty to two counts of enticing two minors, a 13-year-old male and 16-year-old male, and one count of possessing child pornography. He served a federal prison sentence until 2006. In addition to several other run-ins with the law, Brigham had also been convicted in 2010 in Union County, N.C., on three felony fraud charges of obtaining property by false pretenses.

A report exploring Brigham and EMIRE House was published on Feb. 5. A follow-up on Feb. 6 revealed several gaps among local law enforcement's knowledge of some offenders' criminal histories and local LGBT organizations' youth safety policies.

Brigham had described EMIRE House as his opportunity to make amends for his past mistakes and make a difference in other people's lives. He said he should not be judged by his past and was deserving of a second chance.

After the coverage earlier this month, unconfirmed reports to *qnotes* indicated that Brigham had apparently decided to either cease his involvement with EMIRE House or to close the organization. The EMIRE house website had been taken offline and a fundraising website had also been taken down.

Brigham confirmed to *qnotes* on Feb. 9 that EMIRE House was ceasing operations, noting that recent news reports had made it difficult for him to continue. He said the money he has raised would be dispensed according to the wishes of an uncle and a friend who were helping him establish the organization. ::

**more:** You can read the original Feb. 5 report at [goqnotes.com/20987/](http://goqnotes.com/20987/) and the Feb. 6 follow-up story at [goqnotes.com/21000/](http://goqnotes.com/21000/).

Despite the recent progress, the City Council has yet to hold an affirmative public vote on any single matter of LGBT equality or inclusion. The last time the City Council itself publicly considered a stand-alone LGBT measure was in November 1992, when it voted down a proposal to amend its public accommodations ordinance.

**more:** Read the full version of this article online at [goqnotes.com/20899/](http://goqnotes.com/20899/) for more on Foxx's State of the City address, where you can also find a link to read his full prepared remarks.