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Mission:

The focus of *QNotes* is to serve the LGBT and straight ally communities of the Charlotte region, North Carolina and beyond, by featuring arts, entertainment, news and views content in print and online that directly enlightens, informs and engages the readers about LGBT life and social justice issues.

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HRC gala celebrates 20 years, awards locals

1,200-plus attend 20th annual event at Charlotte Convention Center

by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com



The Charlotte Lesbian & Gay Fund was awarded the Human Rights Campaign's Equality Award. L-R: HRC Gala Committee member Marty Miller, CLGF's Tim Bice, Jenni Gaisbauer and Lee Knight Caffery, Gala committee member Maddy Goss, and CLGF's Steve Bentley and Jeremiah Nelson.

Photo Credit: Matt Comer

CHARLOTTE — More than 1,200 guests attended a sold-out fundraising gala at the Charlotte Convention Center on Feb. 21 for the nation's largest LGBT civil rights group. Hosts celebrated local community leaders and encouraged attendees to mobilize on local non-discrimination efforts and the upcoming 2016 election.

The Human Rights Campaign's North Carolina Gala celebrated their 20th annual event in the state, using the opportunity to ask attendees to speak out on Charlotte's hotly debated LGBT-inclusive non-discrimination proposals.

HRC has been among a coalition of groups, including the Mecklenburg LGBT Political Action Committee, Genderlines, Equality NC and others, pushing for updates to the city's public accommodations and other ordinances. In recent days, anti-LGBT religious leaders and organizations have been mobilizing against the proposals.

Scott Bishop, president of MeckPAC and an HRC national board member, issued a call to action from the gala's stage.

"Our opposition has been flooding [City Council members'] email inboxes with messages of fear and hate," Bishop told the crowd, pointing their attention to call-to-action postcards on each table. "Pick up the card and on the back you'll find three simple actions you can take to tell City Council that these ordinances are important and they need to vote yes."

Bishop told the crowd to email Council. "It takes less than a minute to do this," he said, also encouraging dinner-goers to attend City Council's meeting on March 2 at 6 p.m., when the body will hear the ordinance proposals.

"This is important for all the citizens of Charlotte and all the people who visit here," Bishop added.

Bishop's call to action wasn't the only time the ordinance proposals were mentioned. Local drag performer Roxy C. Moorecox welcomed visitors at the event's check-in desk in a red-carpet, Hollywood-style entrance. She mentioned the ordinance package several times, as did City Councilmember Vi Lyles, who said she looked forward to passing the proposals in a video message with welcome statements from several other local officials.

Lyles was joined at the dinner by several local officials, including Charlotte City Councilmembers LaWana Mayfield, Al Austin, Patsy Kinsey and David Howard.

State Sen. Jeff Jackson also attended, giving the evening's opening remarks and telling the crowd that, "North Carolina will not sit by while injustices exist."

Electing a 'pro-equality champion' in 2016

HRC also took the opportunity to mobilize its dinner guests for the 2016 election.

"The pro-equality majority that still exists even in both houses of Congress have never felt the pressure from us to vote its conscience. That's on us," said Joni Madison, a former HRC board member. "We have to force them to be courageous and do the right thing. We can activate the LGBT vote beyond marriage equality. We've got to mobilize and organize. We've got to build an army to elect a new pro-equality champion to the White House in 2016. I think there's going to be someone who fights for us each and every day she sits in that Oval Office."

The movement, Madison said, won't stop at the 2016 presidential election.

"It's not enough to just elect a president," she said. "We've got to send a message to those elected officials who decide to cement their feet on the side of discrimination. It's up to us to kick them out of office."

Madison delivered the evening's keynote address in the absence of HRC President Chad Griffin, who was expected to attend the anniversary gala. Organizers told attendees

that Griffin was unable to find a flight to Charlotte due to ongoing winter weather on the east coast.

Locals, celebrity honored

HRC's gala also featured several awards and recognitions, including awards to a Western North Carolina community leader and Charlotte's local LGBT philanthropy group.

Joshua Bledsoe received the group's individual Equality Award. An instructor at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, N.C., Bledsoe is also a founding faculty advisor for the college's LGBT student group, PRISM, and has been involved with a variety of local LGBT efforts, including a production of "The Laramie Project" and the creation of a Western North Carolina gay-straight alliance network.

The Charlotte Lesbian & Gay Fund, an endowment initiative of the Foundation for The Carolinas, is the state's largest ongoing funder for LGBT causes. It received the organization Equality Award.

Local couples and plaintiffs in marriage equality cases were also honored, with gala co-chair Jeremy Carter giving a special nod to Greensboro couple Lennie Berger and Pearl Berlin, two plaintiffs in an ACLU of North Carolina case.

"Lennie Berger and Pearl Berlin met and fell in love 48 years ago. They were legally married in Maine in 2013," Carter said from the stage. "But their marriage was not recognized in their home state of North Carolina. That is until just recently. Couples like Lennie and Pearl are exactly the reason we need full marriage equality across this great nation."

Openly lesbian actress Samira Wiley, best known for her role as Poussey Washington on Netflix's "Orange is the New Black," was given the group's Visibility Award. Wiley, 27, was recently featured on one of the *OUT* 100 20th anniversary magazine covers.

Organizers of the Charlotte dinner say it is HRC's second-largest fundraising event, following the group's national dinner in Washington, D.C.

The 20th anniversary gala was being hosted in Charlotte for the fourth time since returning to the Queen City in 2012. It had been previously hosted in Charlotte from 2005 through 2009, before moving to Raleigh in 2010 and 2011. The first local HRC gala was held in Greensboro in 1996 and 1997, then moved to Raleigh from 1998 through 2002 and then back to Greensboro in 2003 and 2004 before moving to Charlotte. ::



Equality Award winner Josh Bledsoe, left, with HRC Gala Committee member Daniel Valdez.

Photo Credit: Matt Comer