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An Interview with Matt Foreman

Interview with Matt Foreman
By Rex Wockner

Here starts an occasional series in which we pick the brains of well-known homosexuals I've encountered during my 20 years in gay journalism. We start with National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman.

WOCKNER: Matt, is the gay glass half full or half empty in America today? Are we winning or losing? Here's an interesting quote from *Queer As Folk's* Peter Paige (Emmett), which he made to the St. Louis gay newspaper *The Vital Voice* in mid-May: "I think we've already won. And that's a hard thing to remember because it's really a scary time. But when you look at what has happened in the gay-rights movement in the last 36-37 years, we have progressed further, in a shorter period of time, than any civil-rights movement in the history of the planet, and there's bound to be a backlash. ... Uppity people get uppity and get excited and get organized and there's a backlash. But I truly believe that we have so profoundly impacted the generation behind us that we've already won. We just don't know it yet." I think I agree with Peter.

FOREMAN: The question is not whether we are going to win complete equality, but when? Yes, in many ways we have 'won' the cultural war, which is the essential predicate to winning legal equality. This is underscored by polls showing 75-percent-plus believe we will eventually win marriage equality, and by strong support among younger people. Yes, amazing progress in a very short period of time. All of this is of little consequence, however, in the day-to-day lives of our people. Job, housing and public-accommodation discrimination is rampant. FBI statistics show that more people are being murdered because of their sexual orientation than for any other bias reason. Our young people are still routinely bullied and beaten in schools. The examples of egregious injustices in the area of partner and family recognition are too many to list. I could go on and on. The glass is filling up, but not nearly quickly enough.

WOCKNER: Would you say there are stark regional discrepan-



cies in the amount of antigay bias and discrimination that out people face? I live in San Diego where city, county and state law all three protect gays from discrimination. We've certainly had no antigay murders in the 12 years I've lived here. State law lets gay couples register as domestic partners and grants them every state-level right of marriage — and recognizes their families. I'm sure people in Massachusetts and Vermont and some other places live in a similar environment. Are there two Americas, or three or four, when it comes to things gay?

FOREMAN: There are many Americas for LGBT people — depending on the overlays of race, class, gender identity, gender and geography. The reach of pro-LGBT laws in a given jurisdiction is an indicator of community attitudes. But, those attitudes vary widely within short distances. In New York City, for example, it's much easier being out in Chelsea than Bensonhurst. But, other factors — such as race and class — have a much greater impact than geography. Money and race usually dictate where you can live or where you are educated, which is a principle indicator of lifetime income. Money can buy insulation from the more

overt aspects of antigay discrimination, but has less power in escaping from racism and sexism.

WOCKNER: That makes it sound like we can't achieve GLBT equality until every other social ill in America is eradicated also. I think I disagree. There's still racism and sexism in Massachusetts, but same-sex couples in Massachusetts, of all races and genders, have achieved full legal equality, including access to plain old marriage.

Can there be no GLTB equality without full success of The Thousand Year Plan for Peace and Harmony in the Universe?

FOREMAN: You asked if there were different gay Americas, and that's what I addressed. It's very important not to fall into the stereotype that we all live in a *Will & Grace* world. Of course it's possible to win equal rights under the law without overcoming other social ills. African American leaders have talked a lot about the fact that all laws upholding racial discrimination have been eliminated for many years, but the economic gap between whites and blacks — and many other measurements of discrimination — have not narrowed since *Brown vs. Board of Education*. So, unless we also deal some crushing blows to heterosexism and the other isms that afflict our society along the way, the win will be illusory for broad swaths of our community.

WOCKNER: That's one particular take on gay lib — and one that NGLTF is well-known for. Moving on... What are the chances that all these state antimarriage constitutional amendments eventually will be found by the U.S. Supreme Court to violate the U.S. Constitution. Is that something we

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Activist Jean O'Leary Dies

Noted Democratic Party Official and Gay and Lesbian Rights Leader was 57

LOS ANGELES — Lesbian activist, former nun and Democratic party leader Jean O'Leary died June 4 at the San Clemente, California, home of Lisa Phelps, her partner of 12 years, and surrounded by her family and close friends.



O'Leary, who had been battling lung cancer for two years, was 57.

O'Leary was an advocate for the rights of gays and lesbians, women and people with HIV/AIDS as well as a prominent Democratic party activist. Over the course of a 35-year career, she ran several national gay rights groups, co-founded pioneering organizations, including Lesbian Feminist Liberation and National Coming Out Day, and worked to elect Democratic candidates.

Born March 4, 1948, in Kingston, New York, Jean Marie O'Leary grew up mostly in Ohio. She used the occasion of her high school graduation speech in 1966 to announce her entry into the Sisters of the Holy Humility convent. In a 1984 anthology, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, O'Leary said she joined the convent because "there was no anti-war movement, no women's movement, no gay movement in Ohio in 1966" and that she "wanted to do something special, to have an impact on the world."

She graduated from Cleveland State University with a degree in psychology in 1970, left the convent and became the drummer for a girl band, The Satin Dolls. Soon thereafter, she packed up her drums and moved to New York to pursue doctoral studies in organizational development at Yeshiva University. She became enmeshed in the burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement, attending the political meetings and social events at the Firehouse, joining the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) and driving once a week to Albany to lobby state legislators on gay issues.

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