



ADVOCATING FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

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Moving the Movement Forward

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Looking back over the last year, California's transgender communities have many reasons to be proud. It seems like every time I talk with a group of transgender activists and allies, someone will comment that we are bearing witness to a profound transformation in regards to how society recognizes and supports people who are transgender or gender variant. In no state is this clearer than here in California. And it is inspiring that in the midst of all of this forward momentum, our communities continue to build our own ability to actively participate in and, in many cases, lead these changes.

From legislators to high school students to employers to parents, a growing number of advocates and allies are leading the movement for equality and fairness for everyone – regardless of gender identity or expression. For instance, Sylvia Guerrero and her family ended their long march to justice as the final chapter in the trial and sentencing of Gwen's murderers closed. Never ones to rest, the family continued their work with Equality California and Assemblywoman Sally Lieber on the Gwen Araujo Justice for Victims Act (which became law on January 1, 2007).

We saw many other successes this year as well. Transgender leaders from around California got together in February for the first time in anyone's memory to hold a Transgender Leadership Summit. Over 100 activists and allies built their leadership skills, shared their advocacy experiences, and brainstormed about their vision for the future of the movement.

Transgender economic development efforts also took center stage this year to address the high rates of unemployment and underemployment in our communities. Building on momentum created when local community members in Los Angeles and San Francisco held groundbreaking transgender job fairs, TLC worked with the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the Women's Foundation of California and almost 200 community members to document the economic health of transgender people in San Francisco. Our report, *Good Jobs NOW!*, helped to spur the city's elected officials to commit \$300,000 to Year One of the Comprehensive Transgender Employment Initiative.

The Initiative was only one milestone celebrated in San Francisco this summer. In June, community members and the Police Department recognized the 40th Anniversary of the Gene Compton's Cafeteria Riot. Soon after, District Attorney Kamala Harris gathered more than 200 law enforcement officials from around the state to a two-day Symposium on Panic Strategies. The conference included significant information about violent crimes committed against transgender people.

The community also made great strides in creating more access to culturally competent health care. Looking at health services in San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Cruz as models, activists in Alameda, Los Angeles, and Santa Clara counties began creating grassroots campaigns to expand local health care options. Their work is being supported by foundations like the California Endowment, California Wellness, and Liberty Hill (including first-time multi-year grants in some cases).

These are only a sliver of the advancements that were made around the state in 2006. And while the staff and Board of TLC played varying roles in these successes, individual community members, their families, and allies are increasingly leading social change initiatives. I remember a time when only a handful of people around the state were recognized as transgender community leaders. Now, the wide scope of work that is being accomplished is led by hundreds of community members.

Who are these leaders? They're you and me; people from all segments of our communities who take the time to make a difference. A mother turning her quest for justice into a national phenomenon; an employee asserting his rights and facilitating sensitivity training for his employer and co-workers; an activist working tirelessly to initiate dialogues with her local elected officials; a small group of community members who are doing something about their difficulties finding medical care; and, a 16-year old who simply wants to go to school as himself. They are the emerging leaders who stand up and speak out against stigma and discrimination on behalf of those of us who don't yet have the safety, or interest, or security, or confidence to do it for ourselves. Collectively, our advocacy is fueling an unstoppable movement with one single purpose - respect for our human rights regardless of our gender identity or expression.

Most people who are doing this work do it without titles or media coverage and in too many cases without support of any kind. Hopefully, their determination and tenacity will inspire you as it does me. After all, the success that we're achieving as a movement is owed in large part to the unrecognized efforts of these activists to create a state where we all have the freedom to live as our true selves.

I suspect that we will look back on 2007 as "the year of the emerging leader" within California's transgender civil rights movement. All of us have a part to play in making that happen. For the experienced activists, I recommend being a mentor to someone who is just learning the ropes. For people who have retired from activism, please share your stories and strategies with the rest of us even if you can't be on the front lines anymore. And for those who haven't yet found the confidence to put your ideas into the mix, join us at the Second Annual Transgender Leadership Summit. It's a great way to invest in yourself by building your skills, meeting people who share your ideas, and creating the network you need to help make a difference. It's also a great way to invest in our community's future. And I promise, that kind of investment brings returns which we can all celebrate.