

Rainbow coalition

By Laura Kiritsy

MassEquality board member Sue Hyde, who is white, has just three words for her organization's unprecedented push to bridge the gaping divide between the local GLBT community's racial and ethnic minorities and its predominantly white political and organizational leadership: "It's about time."

Across the country, the organized movement for GLBT rights has long been criticized for being male-dominated and "too white," resulting in the issues affecting gay people of color being largely overlooked. The equal marriage movement has brought that tension into stark relief. The unfortunate reality is that many GLBT ethnic and racial minorities, like their heterosexual peers, are more consumed with finding decent jobs, adequate housing, meeting basic healthcare needs and dealing with immigration issues than with planning a wedding reception - often with the added stress of being closeted within their churches, family structures and neighborhoods at the risk of losing their only support systems. David Wilson, an African-American MassEquality board member says that such "fundamental rights that most people take for granted" are the most pressing priorities for many GLBT minorities and their families. That was made all the more clear when MassEquality formed its 18-member board of directors earlier this year. Besides Wilson, only two other members are African-American. The rest are white.

In the bigger picture - the busing crisis of the 1970s being the most obvious example - Boston is a city long marred by racial strife and a lack of minority representation in leadership positions. The good news is, that's slowly changing. Census figures from 2000 show a "majority-minority" population, and growing political clout is evident in the election of Felix Arroyo, the first Latino member of the Boston City Council, in 2003; and Andrea Cabral's dominating electoral victory over City Councilor Stephen Murphy in the Suffolk County Sheriff's race last year.

By extension, the city's GLBT community is no exception. The Boston Pride Parade in the past has been criticized for not representing the community's racial and ethnic diversity. In June 2003, tensions flared during a post-Pride party at the Jorge Hernandez Cultural Center when a white member of the drag troupe All the King's Men took to the stage to perform a 50 Cent rap in an oversized afro wig. When Mia Anderson, a member of Drag King Sluts and Goddesses, a performance troupe of women of color, took to the stage to express her dismay with the display, she was greeted with derisive laughter from some audience members.

There are a handful of openly gay elected officials and activists working on the marriage equality movement. But it's a small group: Cambridge City Councilors Denise Simmons and Ken Reeves, and Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus co-chair Gary Daffin, all of whom are African-American, and openly gay state Sen. Jarrett Barrios, who is Latino. So it's not all that surprising a lot of the leadership on the marriage front that's come from African-Americans, Latinos and other people of color has come from straight allies like state Rep. Byron Rushing, state Sen. Dianne Wilkerson and the Rev. William Sinkford, president of the Unitarian

Universalist Association, all of whom are African-American and state Rep. Marie St. Fleur, who is Haitian-American.

So how to smooth the way for a more harmonious and inclusive GLBT movement in Boston? Enter Jeff Stone and City-Wide Dialogues on Boston's Racial and Ethnic Diversity, a program that brings ethnically and racially mixed groups of residents together for a series of structured conversations aimed at fostering relationships across the race-based divide. "What they do is help people break down stereotypes and increase understanding and talk about all the issues around our ethnic and racial identities - explicitly," explains Stone, who co-chairs the program, which runs on public and private donations. "So they give people a chance, usually for the first time in their lives, to go beyond a superficial level and really talk about the issues around our racial identity."

Launched in November 2003, nearly 500 people have taken part in 30 dialogue sessions in neighborhoods across the city. Last spring, Stone, who is white, talked up the program at one of a handful of meetings the board of the MassEquality Education Fund, MassEquality's educational arm, held with GLBT people of color to discuss how to build a more inclusive movement. The group decided the dialogues were the right step at the right time.

"All of us knew that we had not done an adequate job of inviting in LGBT people of color into the project that MassEquality was most concerned with and putting all of its energy into," Hyde explains, referring to the group's goal of preserving marriage equality in Massachusetts. The age-old practices of blanketing the community with announcements via mass communications and hoping for a response from a proportionate number GLBT people of color was not working. "After decades, decades of this very same kind of very inadequate effort to invite in activist leaders of color it seemed to us that we needed to do something different," says Hyde. The City-Wide dialogues represented the opportunity to begin a more substantive conversation across a racially and ethnically diverse spectrum about the issues at the root of the problem.

But the organization is looking to build a more inclusive movement in other ways as well. Josh Friedes, board chair of the MassEquality Education Fund, who is white, says that MassEquality will soon hire a paid staff member whose sole function is to reach out to minority communities both gay and straight. "MassEquality is in the process of writing a job description for a part-timer who would do outreach to diverse GLBT organizations as well as organizations that may be interested in learning about our work," he explains. "There are a lot of organizations that do civil rights work for people of color or are concerned about family issues for people of color and we want to be able to reach out to these organizations and we want to be able to enter into discussions about our common goals."

Strategic concerns aside, Hyde exposes an underlying reason for the MassEquality Education Fund's initiation of the dialogues that reflects the movement's long history of racial disparity: "This has never been done and aren't we ashamed of that? Do we not have in our hearts and minds a bit of remorse and regret and embarrassment that we have lived in this community and worked in this community for so long and have made ... little discernable effort toward building a movement and a community that is more fully representative? I feel embarrassed about it."

City-Wide Dialogues is now accepting online registrations for a dialogue among

racially and ethnically diverse members of the GLBT community. Like other dialogues held in the city, the session will comprise four two-hour sessions held in consecutive weeks. There is an optional fifth session, which Stone says most participants attend, to brainstorm ways to continue to build on the foundational relationships created in the sessions. Groups in Dorchester, Roslindale and the South End, Stone notes, have continued to meet on a social basis. Likewise, Hyde is hopeful that the first GLBT dialogue won't be the last.

But despite MassEquality's singular focus on preserving marriage equality in Massachusetts, the purpose of the dialogues is not to recruit people of color to the marriage movement, but to unearth new GLBT people of color willing to lead their respective communities on issues that they identify as important. Says Wilson, "For me it's not any different than the early civil rights movements where the African-American community stayed within itself and worked really hard to build alliances within itself, understanding what the issues were, gaining strength, confidence and then at some point bridging the gap to the mainstream. We just really need to feel we understand our own issues, we're comfortable with our own issues, they're ours, [and] not watered down by the mainstream community." After that he adds, "there's a bridge to the mainstream community with issues that we own, that we've taken ownership for. "And I really believe that that's kind of where we're at right now."

And that's the only way the dialogues will be successful, says Aandre Davis, the director of operations for Boston Pride who attended two of the MassEquality Education Fund spring planning meetings. "I think what people are expecting [is] to wake up one day and be in Oz," says Davis. "I expect to see incremental changes." People must get on board with the realization that change won't happen tomorrow, Davis asserts, and MassEquality must lay out clear objectives. "I think we have to stop doing these little panel discussions and these forums, and thinking that, 'Oh my God we're going to wake up or we're going to walk outside and there's going to be a rainbow outside.' There is not going to be rainbow," says Davis. "There could be one day."

But the impetus for a more inclusive movement is also incumbent upon communities of color, says Davis, who is African-American. "I've been doing Boston Pride [for] six, seven years now, Davis notes. "So I don't want black people to tell me, or minorities to tell me that white people control the entire thing. That's not true. No matter what *Boston Magazine* says," he laughs, referring to the magazine's May 2005 list of 35 Gay Power Players, which included just three people of color, and its list of Boston's "100 People Who Run This Town" which included just one person of color, Ten Point Coalition founder the Rev. Eugene Rivers, at No. 97.

"If we really want things to get better, when are we going to start [saying] , 'Okay now it's up to me. MassEquality we've asked you to do this, we've asked you to set up this forum, but what are we as a community going to do to learn this forum?'"

Arnold Sapenter, an African-American gay man who has facilitated three City-Wide Dialogues, including two in his South End neighborhood, says that there is much to be learned in the dialogues. "I think all too often people in the GLBT community do not have an opportunity to talk about race and ethnicity in an open manner that is not either contentious or difficult and uncomfortable for people. I think that the dialogues in general provide an opportunity for people to discuss race and ethnicity in a more comfortable and less stressful and less antagonistic kind of environment," he says. "It also aids in increasing everyone's understanding, or at least the

understanding of people involved in the dialogues, of different races and ethnicity."

If MassEquality or if any other GLBT organization wants to get people of color involved in them," Sapenter adds, "it helps if they have an understanding of some of the problems and some of the issues that people of color, in particular African-Americans and Latinos, have to deal with on a daily basis which many times are issues around and things like employment and housing and just basic economic survival kinds of issues."

Sapenter's experience as an African-American gay man in the city highlights some of the work that needs to be done. "My experience personally is that some members of the gay community are very tolerant and very open to others or people who are different from themselves," he observes. "On the other hand I've encountered some members of the community can be equally as biased and prejudiced as anyone else and sometimes there are people within the community who feel that they may be gay but if they're white they still are better than someone who is of color. So there are still some of those kinds of tensions that exist within the GLBT community. And I think you usually find those tensions more when people are competing for limited resources or competing for what they consider to be power attention or recognition."

Clearly the members of Boston's GLBT community, whatever their race or ethnicity, have their work cut out for them. Substantive, productive discussions about the thorny issue of race are difficult in any city and with any racially mixed group of people, gay or straight. "It's not always comfortable and it's not supposed to be," says Stone. "If it were there'd be no point in doing this. We want to give people an opportunity to challenge their assumptions."

For more information or to register for the GLBT dialogue on racial and ethnic diversity, visit bostondialogues.org or call 617.442.4519.

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