

>> EQUALITY FORUM SUPPLEMENT 2007

The Price Is Rights

Has Equality Forum been so successful that its end is near?

by [J. Cooper Robb](#)



Considering the changing attitudes of mainstream America and the civil rights victories won by gays and lesbians over the past 15 years, will LGBT civil rights progress to a point in the not-so-distant future when the Equality Forum is no longer necessary?

“I’m hoping for the day when we can shut our doors,” says Equality Forum founder Malcolm Lazin, “but there’s still a lot of work to be done.”

Lazin sees Equality Forum’s evolution as a reflection of what he terms “likely the last major civil rights movement in America.” When the organization began 15 years ago, many LGBT people were still in the closet due to widespread institutional homophobia. There was no discussion of same-sex marriage and virtually no legislation protecting gays and lesbians. “At a time when others were doing just pride parades, we focused on organizations and issues on what we thought was a nascent civil rights movement.”

Equality Forum began in 1993 as PrideFest. The first conference featured 15 organizations holding events over a single weekend. In 2001 the organization increased its focus to include international issues, and two years later officially changed its name to Equality Forum. Now a week-long event featuring more than 60 programs, parties and special events, Equality Forum has launched numerous initiatives, produced three award-winning documentary films, and coordinates national and international LGBT history month.

After years of struggle, Lazin says the LGBT community is beginning to win over the hearts and minds of middle America. He uses the incidents involving Gen. Pace and conservative pundit Ann Coulter, both of whom were reprimanded by Republican politicians for making homophobic comments, as examples of America’s newfound acceptance of the LGBT community.

But the battle for LGBT rights soldiers on. Lazin points out there’s currently no federal hate crime protection for gays and lesbians, or workplace nondiscrimination protection in Pennsylvania. And although 60 percent of Americans support openly gay military personnel—and every NATO ally except Turkey allows openly gay members in the military—the U.S. Armed Forces continue to reject openly gay and lesbian service members.

But many of these issues have been at the top of the LGBT civil rights agenda for years, making it perhaps harder for Equality Forum to boost attendance at this year’s program.

In conjunction with the popular SundayOut, Lazin has scheduled two discussions at the Constitution Center, one with gender-reassignment pioneer Dr. Renee Richards and another with conservative gay columnist Andrew Sullivan. Also new to the Forum is the “GLBT Rights as Human Rights” program and the “National

Aging Panel” that focuses on the graying of the gay community.

Lazin emphasizes that Equality Forum isn't content with attracting members of the LGBT community solely, but seeks a healthy portion of the mainstream as well. “Civil rights movements are made up not only of the folks affected, but by their allies. At SundayOut we get a significant percentage of folks in the mainstream,” he says.

As for the organization's long-term future, Equality Forum members have tried to prognosticate where they'll be 10 years from now. Lazin predicts the next decade will usher in both hate crime and workplace nondiscrimination protection at the federal and state level, openly gay service members and (at minimum) civil unions in most states.

As for gay marriage, he expects in 10 years “we'll be approaching a time when the Supreme Court is willing to consider the issue of whether depriving same-sex couples the right to marry is a deprivation of civil rights.”

Given changing public attitudes, Lazin believes it's inevitable that one day the LGBT community will enjoy the same rights afforded mainstream Americans. Equality Forum's goal in the next decade is to take the appropriate steps to accelerate the process.