

LGBT Group Looks ‘Beyond Marriage’ Is fight for marriage equality too narrow?

Monday, 7 Aug 2006

By Kerry Eleveld

Timing is everything. So when a group of about 250 LGBT activists and leaders released a document called “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage” the very day that the Washington State Supreme Court ruled against the right of gay couples to marry — the second big strike for same-sex marriage in July — it generated some interest.

Newsweek, CBS, The New York Times and others jumped on the press release. “We’ve gotten a lot of coverage, which has been exciting but we weren’t quite prepared,” said Joseph DeFilippis, one of the 18 authors of the document who is also the executive director of Queers for Economic Justice.

“Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships” advocates for broadening the scope of the LGBT movement’s current same-sex marriage battle. It maintains that traditional marital benefits — such as health care, Social Security, housing, etc. — should be available to all families whether they consist of a grandmother raising a grandchild or a three-parent household.

DeFilippis said the document was really intended to promote discussion within the LGBT community not mainstream America.

“I think the mainstream press cares because they always seem to love something if they perceive it to be a fight within the community. I think that’s the way they read it,” DeFilippis said of the document’s release. He added that the Beyond Marriage coalition (beyondmarriage.org) had set the release date of July 26 long ago, and its timing vis-a-vis the Washington ruling was purely coincidental.

But is there a fight brewing within the community about whether to fight for legal recognition of marriage or some broader type of family recognition?

“I think many of us who have been critical [of the marriage movement] have been slow to offer that critique because, at this moment in our history, the only people critiquing gay marriage are big homophobes from the right,” DeFilippis said.

“We have no objection to gay marriage per se. We just think there’s so many more people in our community that we should be fighting for, and a better strategy all along would have been to fight for the separation of these rights from the institution of marriage,” he added.

He is careful to point out that all 250 signatories had different reasons for supporting the document. Some think the LGBT movement should be about sexual liberation and they find the idea of same-sex marriage ideologically confining. Some think the vision for what counts as a family, gay or non-gay, should simply be broader.

But all signers seem to take issue with the idea of the movement having a singular focus on marriage equality.

Terry Boggis, another author/signatory, referred to the document as “Marriage Plus.”

“It’s not called ‘Instead of Marriage,’” she said, careful to note that she was speaking for herself only and not the entire

group.

Boggis said she was moved to work on the document by the diverse set of families she sees every day through her work as director of the Center for Kids at The LGBT Community Center in New York City.

One example she gave was that of a lesbian and a gay man who made a baby together, then moved out of the city to the suburbs to raise the child. The woman soon found a female partner who eventually moved in and they became a three-parent household.

"That's not a family that fits anybody's conceptual definition of what a family is allowed to look like, but in function and in feeling, they absolutely are," Boggis said.

She added that she has a real sense of urgency around not leaving any families without legal and financial protections. "What makes my heart soar is to picture a bigger umbrella that's much more protective of many more people."

Show me the money

A more inclusive vision of family also makes the hearts soar of most LGBT activists who have been fighting hard for marriage equality.

"Ninety percent of what's in that document could have been signed onto by virtually every person working in the gay movement today," said Evan Wolfson, president of Freedom to Marry and author of "Why Marriage Matters."

Matthew Foreman, executive director of The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, added that the gay rights movement has been multifaceted ever since its advent in 1969.

"We've never been a one-issue community, and we can't be a one-issue community, and that includes the issue of family recognition," said Foreman. "We need to move forward on all fronts," he added, ticking off everything from marriage to domestic partnership rights to nondiscrimination protections.

Of course, resources tend to limit the number of fronts that can be attacked.

"There is an allocation of resources that is going overwhelmingly toward gay marriage as a stand-alone issue and not as part of a broader agenda," DeFilippis said.

But Evan Wolfson said the fight for marriage equality has done more to promote alternative forms of partnerships and civil unions and gay families than any other strategy.

"The states in which we have the most protections for families outside of, or beyond marriage, are the states in which we have fought for the freedom to marry," he said, referring to Hawaii, Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, California and Massachusetts.

Wolfson said that the marriage battle has attracted funding rather than diverting it away from other struggles. "More money has gone into the states, more money has gone into the national organizations, generated by the excitement of and the challenge in the work to win the freedom to marry," he said.

But DeFilippis said the movement's money could be better spent fighting for universal health care. "Then no one would have to get married to anybody to access health insurance," he said.

He said many countries that have same-sex marriage or something close to it, such as Canada, already had universal health care and stronger welfare states in advance. "I would argue that it's in that context that it's easiest to achieve gay marriage," said DeFilippis.

Both DeFilippis and Boggis noted that corporate America has taken the lead on increasing benefits access. More than half of Fortune 500 companies now offer domestic partner benefits according to the Human Rights Campaign's latest "State of the Workplace" report. Some of those companies also allow employees to designate who in their family is eligible for

benefits, regardless of whether that person is a sister, a grandmother or whoever.

“That has been such a godsend, not just for us, but for a lot of people who, for whatever complicated reason, choose not to marry,” Boggis said. “It’s so respectful to say to people, ‘I don’t know what the circumstances of your life are, I don’t need to know. You’re a human being and therefore you should be able to partake, and your pathway to participation can be determined by you.’”

Though corporate America may see broadening the benefits umbrella to include more people as good for business, lawmakers and the American people may be a tougher sell.

Universal health care took its lumps alongside repealing anti-gay military policies during the Clinton Administration. Both initiatives went down in flames. But timing is everything. As health insurance costs skyrocket, there have been rumblings anew for a government sponsored health-care system. Back in 1992, popular support for universal health care seemed as laughable as “Hillary for President.”

Whether the issue of broadening the fight for benefits catches fire within the LGBT community the way marriage equality did remains to be seen. The pending marriage decision in New Jersey may either fan the movement’s flames or squelch them.