

Principles and Pragmatism

The Dallas Principles offer a "No Delay, No Excuses" roadmap to GLBT equality

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IT IS SOMETIMES DONE with baby steps, other times with great leaps, and every so often it's done in circles. Still, advocates and enemies alike would have a difficult time denying that modern history has seen the GLBT community moving steadily in the direction of full equality.

The value of a particular step may, however, be difficult to gauge at the time. Some who remember the Stonewall Riots say they didn't regard the moment as historic. Then again, those masses at the 2000 Millennium March on Washington may have thought they were heralding in a new gay millennium. Maybe they were. Time will judge.

Time will also judge the Dallas Principles, a core set of beliefs crafted in mid-May in their namesake city — specifically, the Hyatt Regency at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, just off Terminal C and not to be confused with slightly swankier Grand Hyatt Terminal D. Here, over the course of a weekend, 24 people who individually have been making steps toward equality gathered at the invitation of Juan Ahonen-Jover, a wealthy technology entrepreneur and activist. He wasn't picking up anybody's tab, of course, only serving as a catalyst.

Ahonen-Jover and his partner, Ken, manage a listserv from their home in Miami Beach, Fla., that brings together the powerful and passionate in GLBT activism.



"The sense from these conversations is that the opportunity to advance civil rights is at its peak," says Ahonen-Jover, pointing to President Barack Obama's popularity and pledges to the GLBT community, Vice President Joe Biden's years of experience and history as an ally to the community, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's advocacy — not to mention the fact that the late gay icon Harvey Milk's San Francisco supervisor district is part of her congressional district. Add to that the passion in the community sparked by the disastrous battle in California to push back Proposition 8.

"These circumstances are so unique," he continues. "At the same time, we didn't see enough aggressiveness in terms of pursuing equality."

So, what to do? Ahonen-Jover's answer called for a pinch of pragmatism, a spoonful of serendipity, a sense of urgency and maybe even a couple crossed fingers. In April, word went out to activists and advocates with whom he was familiar, who shared his feeling that something must be done to seize the moment. What, exactly, remained to be seen. Who, exactly, should be involved, depended on which others his initial contacts thought should be invited, and who had interest — as well as the time and resources to commit to a weekend summit.

The location, Dallas, was the easy part. It's in the middle of the country.

THE WEEKENDERS

"I ARRIVED SATURDAY morning," says C. Dixon Osburn, an easy name to place for his years heading the D.C.-based Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, who arrived later than most. "I went right off the plane and right into the conference room."

In the final mix gathered for the weekend, held May 15 to 17, about a third hailed from the D.C. area, though you wouldn't call many native Washingtonians. Osburn himself was likely right at home, having been born and raised in Fort Worth. Then again, the hermet environment of an airport hotel doesn't make for much of a homecoming. Dr. Dana Beyer, of Chevy Chase, Md., says the weekend r as well have been at the bottom of the sea.

"We weren't distracted. We were by the airport. No one was going to a nightclub or a ballgame," she says. But all work and no play didn't make Beyer a dull girl. Rather, she says that there was an electricity in the air that made time fly; an invigorating, unified sense purpose. Looking over this particular collection of authors, Beyer is not the only one to confess to a measure of surprise that the time passed with little conflict.

"This is not a group of people who are shy," says Ahonen-Jover, with a chuckle. "The remarkable thing is how smoothly the meeting went. There was lots of discussion, but amazing mutual respect. People came together with a common purpose, with incredibly different perspectives."

Complementing those diverse perspectives was that activist dedication. With most arriving Friday, there was time for a dinner and no much else. Saturday started at 8 a.m. and pushed into the wee hours of Sunday for some. Donald Hitchcock, in Dallas with his partner Paul Yandura, both longtime movers in Democratic circles and also from Washington, gauged enthusiasm by a simple observation: Saturday morning, no one was late.

"Everyone was on time," he recalls. "There was something that clicked in Dallas. There was a dedication in the air. We worked through lunch. Some of us were up till 2 in the morning so we could present a document [on Sunday] for feedback."

Hitchcock may have been in the minority as someone heading to Dallas with high expectations. Everyone may have made the same commitment to roll up his or her sleeves, but not necessarily without reservations.

Lisa Polyak of Baltimore, a member of the Equality Maryland board of directors who legally challenged Maryland for marriage equality characterized the trip as a "leap of faith," adding, "all the authors had pretty strong personalities. They've all given some measure of their lives to moving LGBT equality forward. And they've all paid a price."

Osburn says there was a fear of wasting time, of spending days in Dallas and producing nothing: "If we go to yet another meeting, are we going to produce anything? Or leave somewhat dissatisfied because we've all agreed to disagree?"

Hailing from Durham, N.C., Pam Spaulding was not part of the Washington-area contingent. As a star of the GLBT blogosphere, however, with her Pam's House Blend site, everyone may have known who she was. Like Polyak, she also recognized a measure of risk in accepting the invitation to Dallas. She's confident her gamble paid off.

"I did not know most of the people there. Even the ones I did know, it was only virtually," says Spaulding, who says she felt added pressure to represent not only a more rural demographic, but to represent the perspectives of lesbians, people of color generally, African Americans specifically, and a few other polling points. "I'm not part of the D.C.-New York nexus of people who get together to talk about this stuff...[Attending] was a matter of time and money. I was investing in participating in something that was going to work. I don't regret participating."

Nor does Lane Hudson, whose credentials include being recognized by *The Advocate*, *Out* magazine and *Time* magazine for his influence in the blogosphere and beyond. A Washington, D.C., resident originally from South Carolina, he captures the sense of just how much sweat went into the final product.

"[On Sunday] morning, we got up and met early and continued to work," he says, giving some credit to facilitator Mike McKay, director of Resource Center Dallas, a GLBT community center. "It had taken the form of a vision statement, the preamble. You have 24 people around the room putting a focused effort into the best possible document. At this point, we'd come to the conclusion that this could be a common document between all people who support LGBT equality.... We pored over it. It was a very laborious process. At the end of the day, we ended up with a document we all felt really good about."

THE DALLAS PRINCIPLES

THE FINAL PRODUCT breaks down into three parts. First and foremost, there are the principles themselves: "1) Full civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals must be enacted now. Delay and excuses are no longer acceptable. 2) We will not leave any part of our community behind. 3) Separate is never equal. 4) Religious beliefs are not a basis upon which to affirm or deny civil rights. 5) The establishment and guardianship of full civil rights is a non-partisan issue. 6) Individual involvement and grassroots action are paramount to success and must be encouraged. 7) Success is measured by the civil rights we all achieve, not by words,

access or money raised. 8) Those who seek our support are expected to commit to these principles.”

The Preamble traces a line from the Stonewall Riots 40 years ago to this particular moment in time and its attendant opportunities, and decries that the lives of GLBT people have collectively been used as a “political football.” There’s also a warning to those delaying or denying the push to full equality in favor of better timing, that they will be held accountable. The Preamble concludes: “A new day has arrived.”

A third section, “Full Civil Rights Goals,” takes on discrimination and equal opportunities, touching on — in seven points — everything from immigration and school bullying to hate crimes and health care.

The fourth and final section is the “Call To Action.” Here, the authors call for expediency, mobilization, personal responsibility, political accountability, action from allies, media accuracy and recognition.

“I’m incredibly proud of it,” Hudson says of the document, which was released on May 19. “It should be something that everyone take a look at. It’s something we should constantly be fighting for until we get it. They are things we should not compromise on. The preamble gives context to it all. Forty years ago, almost to the day, people had to riot, sacrifice their bodies, for the right to be in public. The courage that that took should give us courage today, to push through.”

What the authors say is remarkable about the final product is that while the it may seem elementary, they don’t believe these sentiments have ever been collected into a single, GLBT-affirming message for community consumption. Some see the Dallas Principles as a sort of evolutionary new message, the descendent of Frank Kameny’s “Gay is good,” or Harvey Milk’s “You must come out!”

“It’s not a reformulation, but a first iteration,” says Beyer, adding that civil-rights figures such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had no trouble expressing such sentiments. “We deserve everything you have, that’s all. It’s not a political strategy. The culture has been so oppressive that even those of us out there on a daily basis forget how much we’re infected with that sense of shame and humiliation that we’re not good enough. We’ve been willing to settle for crumbs for so long, it’s become part of our persona.

“This isn’t really about the activists,” she adds. “It’s about the person who just goes to a bar, or who raises children in the suburbs. This is to inspire them to be proud of who they are.”

Says Polyak, “It’s an aspirational document of how the world could look, how the world *should* look.... You drive law to meet that aspiration. That’s what we want to use the Dallas Principles for, as a bar, a watermark, for how we should be drafting laws, how we should be treating LGBT citizens. It’s a yardstick by which to measure how close or how far we are to achieving those aspirational goals.”

RECEPTION AND RANKLING

WITH THE RELEASE of the Dallas Principles came the kudos *and* the criticism. One of the first to write about the effort, John Wright, the news editor of the gay newspaper, *Dallas Voice*. Wright was given no notice of the effort underway in his own stomping ground.

“From a journalism standpoint, it’s about the lack of openness,” Wright says of his primary concern, though he adds he’s not thought much about the Dallas Principles in the weeks since their debut. “That’s a big part of our role, to make sure groups making decisions affecting people in the community are made in the light of day to some extent. It seems really strange that they didn’t let anyone know and invite them to report.”

Beyer, for one, says she doubts the group would have been able to work as easily, honestly or efficiently had there been reporters in the room observing the proceedings. There is also a defense to be made that with Hudson’s and Spaulding’s prominence as bloggers, they could report to the greater community, though their participation in the process would invalidate that coverage, from the perspective of traditional journalism.

“There was nothing to hide,” Hitchcock says. “There are a lot of places the media don’t get invited. We didn’t know what this was going to be. Many people walked in with low expectations. It would’ve been inviting the media to something that likely the media wouldn’t have wanted to go to. The media wasn’t at the beginning of the Stonewall Riots.”

Spaulding sees both sides of the argument, pointing out that press inclusion or exclusion wasn’t her call to make, while acknowledging that holding the meeting privately could lead to suspicions of “some secret cabal.”

“Some [of the criticism] seemed to be on a very personal level,” she adds. “The main criticisms I’ve seen have been about who constituted the 24. When I went there, I wasn’t going to be Pam Spaulding of Pam’s House Blend. I was just going to help in any way

could, about topics I've been blogging about all the time.”

A more esoteric critique was leveled by Sean Strub, founder of *POZ* magazine. Strub found the title of the new document to be disturbingly similar to the Denver Principles, a 1983 manifesto empowering people with HIV/AIDS, and still relevant today. While Strub is not bothered by the Dallas Principles themselves, he recognizes that branding takes on unprecedented gravity in the noisy Information Age.

“I would mostly characterize it as frustrating and annoying,” says Strub via e-mail. “[It’s] indicative of a failure to consult and consider major grassroots community effort (we have more than 400 community groups signed on). It makes our job more difficult, but it is not crippling.”

Strub considered going more public with his concerns but decided that to do so would “create further divisiveness.” He decided to instead focus on his own work with the Denver Principles, even as he acknowledges the Dallas group’s goals.

“[T]he message of the Dallas Principles is one I support, even if it has caused some confusion within the community.”

Hudson says the Denver Principles were mentioned, though not at length, when it came time for his group to craft a moniker for their new document. While he defends the chosen title as a sort of homage to the Denver Principles and emphasizes that the Dallas authors would not deliberately take any action to detract from the Denver Principles, they’ve also yet to make any concession that would satisfy Strub.

“It would help a bit if they provided some language on their homepage clarifying the distinction between their effort and ours. Perhaps a link that says ‘Are you looking for the Denver Principles?’ and then linking to our site. But to be frank, they have not expressed much interest in ameliorating the situation.”

Probably the most outspoken critic of the Dallas Principles is Michael Petrelis, the well-known GLBT and HIV/AIDS activist, now based in San Francisco but who helped to found ACT-UP in New York in 1987. Petrelis, whose style of activism takes aim at “polite protest with a bazooka, starts with Wright’s criticism of the lack of inclusion and transparency and goes quite a bit further.

Petrelis compares the meeting to the founding of ACT-UP — started with an open-door meeting that he says attracted people from all walks of life and tapped a free flow of community dialogue as its lifeblood — to the exclusivity of the Dallas meeting, and he does not like what he sees.

“Behind closed doors, without any public notice, 24 self-described thinkers...got together to craft principles that would supposedly inspire us,” Petrelis says of the Dallas weekend. “There was no announcement made to the community, no way to sign up if you wanted to attend. It’s a group of friends getting together to act for the rest of us.”

Petrelis takes aim at the D.C.-based activists in particular — though granting that the Dallas authors are “good people” in general — insisting they might better serve the community by raising a fist in the street rather than by having a conversation in a conference room.

“Why can’t the folks who traveled to Dallas take a taxi to [the Department of Justice] and have a picket?” he asks, citing the department’s recent homophobic defense of the Defense of Marriage Act. “I don’t need them flying to Dallas, meeting behind closed doors, coming out with principles that they think will inspire me. Just take the Metro to DOJ and have a press conference. I’m not saying they have to throw a brick, but God damn it, do something on the streets already.”

Longtime local activist Bob Summersgill also has some bones to pick with the final product. An expert in the language of law, having crafted some of the legislation that has brought the D.C. GLBT community closer to full equality, Summersgill read the Dallas Principles with a critical eye, coming to various conclusions that all seem to approach exasperation.

He points first to the fourth Dallas Principle, which asserts “religious beliefs are not a basis upon which to affirm or deny civil rights.”

“The entire Civil Rights Movement was a religious movement,” he points out. “It was all organized out of the churches. Almost all the major figures were reverends. They were inspired by more than their indignation at abuse and injustice. They had religious motivations.”

And though Summersgill has respect for the Dallas Principles authors — he’s a strong supporter of Beyer’s campaign to serve in the Maryland House of Delegates, for example — he says the “no delays, no excuses” rallying cry could be seen as an indictment of the sort of work he’s been doing drafting legislation as part of a thoughtful, years-long strategy.

“I read the principles in their literal form that we should not accept people who are not completely with us; if people need to be coaxed into supporting us, they don’t deserve our support,” says Summersgill. “I think just the opposite has been, and should be, our starting

point. We want to bring more people with us. When we came out to our parents, we often had to work with them to get them to a comfort level.”

Carlene Cheatam, another long-known name in the local effort for GLBT equality, generally welcomes the Dallas Principles, though she wonders if “there’s some meat [on] those bones,” and if so, how to actually translate the words into action.

“What do we do with this?” she asks. “You can’t just send out a press release. You have to build up the people power. What are we doing to touch the average Joe on the street?”

At other points of the gay D.C. spectrum, Michael Sessa, president of the board of The DC Center, the area’s GLBT community center and Michael Crawford, co-founder of DC for Marriage, a marriage-equality program of The DC Center, have both endorsed the Dallas Principles.

“The spirit behind the Dallas Principles is really good: that we want full equality and we want it now,” says Crawford. “My sense was it’s not meant to be a strategy, but a meme, a rallying cry. I wouldn’t say groundbreaking, but the difference is that it puts a lot of it now in one place.”

Sessa, who like Crawford knows many of the authors, adds: “There’s going to be criticism regardless of whatever these people are saying. Part of me says we need to get over our egos — and part of me says I wouldn’t have signed on if I didn’t know people who worked on it.... [But] enough is enough. We need to stop discrimination. We are all people, and people should have the same rights. For me, that’s what they meant: Let’s look at the bigger picture. I think the effort is going to make some impact.”

FROM DALLAS TO TOMORROW

THERE’S NO INDISPUTABLE method for measuring the impact the Dallas Principles are making. Sure, the Dallas Principles Facebook page had nearly 4,500 fans by the end of June. Jose Vargas wrote about the principles for the *Washington Post’s* Web site. Osburn says there were more than a million Google hits for the Dallas Principles the day they were released. That much is known.

What is also clear is that this document is not meant to morph into some sort of organization. The Web site will remain, though it’s being retooled. Some entity will have to manage that site, but authors say that beyond the Dallas Principles themselves, content should be driven by those grassroots components of the community who adopt these principles as their own and contribute content to the site.

In short, how these principles will — or will not — be deployed in the future remains to be seen.

“People will continue to refer to the principles for inspiration, for guidance,” says Hudson. “If the principles become embraced, [leading to] action on the part of Congress and the White House, it would be revolutionary.... We just want to be normal, treated like everyone else by the law. That’s normal. To get there in four years would be revolutionary. Pundits think it’s impossible. We don’t.”

Beyer sums up the Dallas Principles as a sort of necessity — or at least a stab at some missing, needed component — if the GLBT community is going to achieve equality under the law. To make the point, she goes back to Judaism, noting a Jewish tenet that the Messiah will return only after all Jews keep the Sabbath for two weeks in a row, which puts the power in the hands of the people themselves to bring this return. GLBT equality, she says, needs a similar effort.

“The Messiah isn’t going to come when the Messiah wants to come, but because you brought the Messiah,” says Beyer. “It’s about every person playing a role. This applies to every gay and trans person.”

Noting power is “never ceded willingly,” Beyer says the community has to demand its civil rights, being neither rude nor crude, but certainly being forceful.

“There’s a tipping point out there somewhere and we’re a lot closer to it today than we were eight months ago. We want to inspire people to mobilize themselves. This isn’t the inspiration to get them to do it, but maybe it’s just the extra push.”

For a full list of the Dallas Principles authors, a list of endorsees and more information about the effort, visit www.thedallasprinciples.org.



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