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LGBT activists unite at WSU panel

Rebound after Prop. 2, battle tested and a lot stronger

By Jan Stevenson

(Issue 1303)

DETROIT - The Michigan LGBT community is more united, more organized and more battle tested after the stunning loss suffered on Proposal 2 in the November 2004 election. That was the conclusion and tone of a town hall meeting Jan. 13 on the campus of Wayne State University. Titled "From Anger to Action," the seven panelists had unique angles, yet each hammered home their renewed commitment to unity, and their personal pledge to continue working with each other, and with allies within and outside the LGBT community.

"I hope the religious right really enjoyed this victory, because this is their last one," said panelist Sean Kosofsky, director of policy at Detroit's Triangle Foundation. Proposal 2, which passed Nov. 2, amends the Michigan constitution to define marriage as only between a man and a woman, and it may jeopardize domestic partner benefit programs in Michigan.

"It is up to our organizations to sit down and to plan strategically together," said Susan Horowitz, co-publisher of Between The Lines. "We cannot waste resources on redundancy in our mission statements, we cannot afford internal bickering, and we cannot go back to business as usual but rather unite and meet this challenge together."

The panel, organized by Adrienne Lim of WSU's AAUP-AFT LGBT Issues Caucus, included Jay Kaplan, GLBT Legal Project staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union in Detroit, Leslie Thompson, executive director of Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Ferndale, Michael Gibson-Faith of the American Friends Service Committee Faith Action Network, Johnny Jenkins, Jr. of Detroit Black Gay Pride, Imani Williams who was a regional director in Detroit for the Coalition for a Fair Michigan campaign against Proposal 2, Horowitz and Kosofsky. Shea Howell, chair of the Communications Department at Oakland University, moderated the panel discussion that attracted over 60 people.

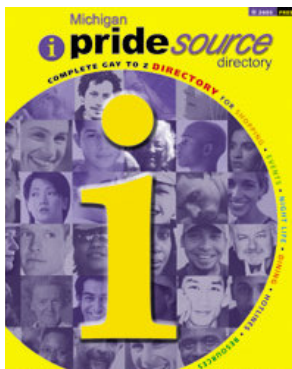
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Jan Stevenson

Shea Howell, front, moderated the 'From Anger to Action' panel at Wayne State University that included Jay Kaplan of the ACLU, Susan Horowitz from BTL, Sean Kosofsky from Triangle Foundation, Johnny Jenkins of DBG Pride, Michael GibsonFaith from AFSC's Faith Action Network, Imani Williams who was a staffer with the Coalition for a Fair Michigan, and Leslie Thompson of Affirmations.

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Kaplan explained that lawyers are in the process of developing a legal strategy to challenge Prop. 2. "We want to do whatever we can to first limit the breadth of this amendment to not include domestic partner benefits and civil unions. Our opponents will try to do the opposite," and Kaplan cited maneuverings by anti-gay legislators to get Michigan's attorney general to define Prop. 2 in the broadest possible terms.

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But Kaplan stressed that legal strategies and legislation will not win the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens. "I really think education - not litigation or legislation - will ultimately make the difference," said Kaplan. "We need to put a face with our struggle and our stories."

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Kosofsky was upbeat and expansive in his predictions for the future. "In Michigan we have incredible people and resources. We have moved forward with such lightening speed. Yes, we have suffered a setback, but it has only made us stronger."

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Many of the panelists pointed to how many non-LGBT allies came forward to help against Prop. 2 and that those relationships should continue to be nourished.

"We got over 300 Michigan clergy to come out against Prop. 2, and that's something we can all be very proud of," said Gibson-Faith.

"We cannot just walk away from these conversations. If we don't talk about [LGBT issues] in faith communities the negativity will go unchecked. We have to have conversations with conservatives, and it is hard - it is very hard. We have to do it without demonizing them," said Gibson-Faith.

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Both Jenkins and Williams spoke out about their disappointment with mainstream civil rights groups that would not condemn Prop. 2.

"It is not okay that black groups aren't on board," said Williams. "Johnny, Courtney Snowden and I sat down with Hester Wheeler of the NAACP and he ran us around the house, through the windows and around the block and finally said that the NAACP could not sign on, and I wanna know why not!"

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"One of the main things we learned on Prop. 2 was how important it is for our allies to see us working on other issues," said Jenkins. "The NAACP leadership wanted to know where we were on the school board issue."

When Howell opened the door for questions, one of the first was whether it is really possible for the LGBT groups to work together. Each panelist answered strongly that they not only had developed strong personal relationships with each other and activists not represented on the panel, but that they were excited about finding new ways to look at organizing in Michigan.

"Take Elliott-Larsen, for example," said Horowitz, referring to the state's non-discrimination legislation that currently does not include sexual orientation or gender identity as protected categories. "Triangle will lead the lobbying effort, but each organization can help. It's harnessing the different assets that will make the difference, and we are committed to getting there."

"Too many see only the end result of Prop. 2 and see failure," said Thompson who said that no organization can operate in isolation. "We should look at the cooperation and see success."

