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# national news

## GLA starts off

*A new national organization for gay men and lesbians has come together*

by Bob Roehr

**G**ay and Lesbian Americans was only a few hours old and already its phone was ringing off the hook.

This happened because the kick-off news conference brilliantly stated the organization's case, because it was tape recorded and later broadcast nationally on the cable television network C-SPAN, and because it was combined with an 800 number so that viewers could contact the new organization.

GLA announced its official formation at a news conference on Monday, Jan. 17. C-SPAN began broadcasting the 45-minute event about 10 pm Eastern time that evening. Within the hour over 120 phone calls had registered on the 800 number. It was an impressive culmination to a busy weekend.

Seventy-five activists from 25 states attended part or all of the two-day marathon of meetings which preceded the announcement.

The most contentious debate during the two days centered around the proposal for fixed positions to ensure diversity in leadership. All those attending supported the concept of diversity. Those arguing for reliance upon commitment and dedication as the principle criteria for leadership carried the vote by a wide margin. All factions seemed pleased with the interim leadership chosen.

The group hammered out structure, priorities and a course of action that begins immediately. In addition to the 800 number which had been suggested only the day before, a national E-mail link is currently in place and the first "action" was agreed upon.

"Queers Across America" had the ambitious goal of staging coordinated news conferences on the same day in the legislative buildings of every one of the fifty state capitals. The day is Feb. 14.

GLA hopes that each news conference will focus on a local or state gay or lesbian issue such as the queer specific sodomy law in Arkansas or demanding recognition of same-sex marriages in Hawaii. The purpose is educational and organizational as much as political.

"We have come together, activists from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, because we cannot sit still any longer," said respected New York activist Ann Northrop in the opening news conference. "We cannot settle for passive leadership in Washington. We want to link activists around the country to make a difference."

Founding member Michael Petrelis read the mission statement of Gay and Lesbian Americans. It emphasizes grassroots organizing and empowerment at the local level. Members will vote to choose both leaders and issue priorities at local, regional and federal levels.

The four interim leaders of GLA will serve in a volunteer capacity in positions that will eventually become elective and paid.

Stephen Reichert is national coordinator. He has worked locally in Washington, D.C., with Queer Nation and in achieving a repeal of the D.C. sodomy statute.

He chastised the existing national organiza-

tions for locking most members of the community out of the decision-making process and failing to empower grassroots activists. The goal of Gay and Lesbian Americans will be to "challenge and empower people to speak for themselves, to have a voice in their own liberation."

Reichert outlined the two national planks of the group: to press for a federal gay and lesbian civil rights bill and to press for an intense "Manhattan-style" Project to find a cure for AIDS. Local priorities will be sodomy repeal and the creation of state and local civil rights protections. Chapters will be encouraged to adopt other issues as locally appropriate.

Mickey Wheatley is secretary-treasurer. He was formerly an attorney with the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and now resides in Washington.

He described the structure of GLA as "from the bottom up, giving our people control of their own civil rights struggle for the first time... by majority vote." All levels of leadership will be elected by GLA members.

To Wheatley, "It will create a balance of power between the national group and the individual chapters by setting up platform and strategy guidelines at the national level, but will also allow plenty of room for local priorities, strategies and sharing of resources."

Kim Edwards hails from East Orange, N.J. She has participated in ACT UP/New York and worked on gaining passage of gay and lesbian civil rights protections in New Jersey. She will spearhead outreach and membership.

Her goal is to embrace the diversity of

the gay and lesbian community in all of its aspects. She welcomed both those who are currently members of other organizations as well as those "who feel disenfranchised and left out of gay and lesbian organizations."

John Carl Lewis is communications coordinator. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, he works in the Clinton administration.

"We have been an integral part of the history, the culture and the future of America," he said. He went on to explain how GLA would harness electronic technology to link together and share information between the disparate parts of the gay and lesbian communities.

"I want to announce that in 1994 the time for the isolated, fearful, powerless homosexual is over," said Lewis. "It is done. Now. We are going to take our place at the American table. We are not coming through insidious means. We are going to walk right in the front door. And we are going to sit down. And we are going to be American."

To reach Gay and Lesbian Americans, write PO Box 77533, Washington, DC 20013-7533. Voice/Fax (202) 232-1773 or call (800) 889-5111. Videotape copies of the C-SPAN broadcast will be available on loan and for airing on cable public access.

