

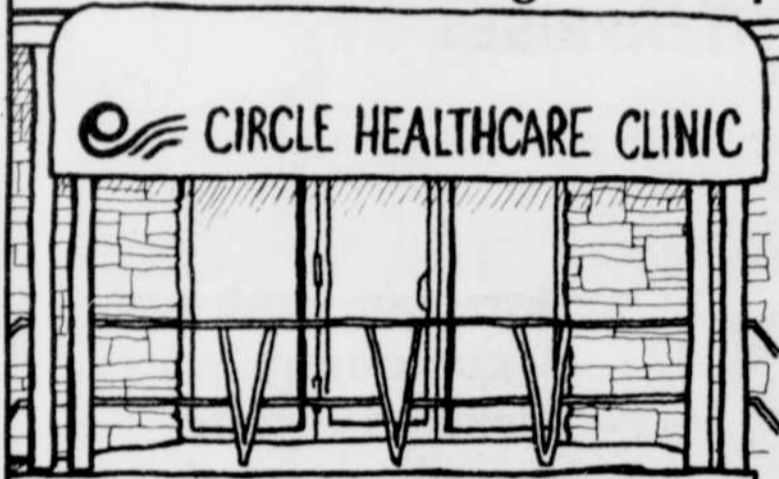
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national news

GLAAD reinvents itself

Merging of the New York and Los Angeles chapters is a first step toward building a national structure

by Richard Shumate

Armed with a \$300,000 grant and a new blueprint for the future, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has become the latest gay and lesbian group to begin the process of reinventing itself.

The first step came earlier this year when GLAAD's chapters in Los Angeles and New York merged their assets to create a national organization large enough to raise serious money and deal with the national media. The next step is to hire a national staff and begin transforming GLAAD chapters in eight cities around the country into groups that can function as grass-roots organizations in their regions.

"I want GLAAD to have a presence in the backyard of the radical right. Wherever they're defaming us, I want us to be there," says Donna Red Wing, GLAAD's Portland, Ore.-based national field coordinator.

GLAAD's mission is to work for fair, accurate and inclusive representations of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, primarily by monitoring and responding to incidents of defamation in the news and entertainment media.

Until now, the group has been a loose confederation of 10 chapters sprinkled across the country and small groups—called outposts and outlooks—in small cities and rural areas. An organization was established to coordinate efforts among chapters, called GLAAD/USA, but it proved ineffective.

"We were speaking with 10 different voices," says Red Wing.

Also, many of the smaller chapters were operating on shoe-string budgets, without much outside staff support.

Recognizing the problems, GLAAD's leadership decided a strong national organization was needed. But instead of adding another organizational layer on top of what was already there—and siphoning off money for it from local chapters—the decision was made to create the national group by combining GLAAD's two largest chapters, located in New York and Los Angeles.

"It was certainly a tough sell to the chapter's board," says Richard Jennings, one of the founders of the Los Angeles chapter and a principal in the merger negotiations. "But I think it was one of the finest moments that I've ever seen in our community. In the end, people didn't get stuck on ownership."

"There seemed to be a fear they would lose local autonomy," Red Wing says. "But I think they collectively realized this was the best way to go."

The Los Angeles and New York chapters had the largest paid staffs and, because of their locations in the centers of the news and entertainment industries, already frequently dealt with the national media. With the merger, the two staffs will become part of one organizational structure, with offices in each city, under the direction of an executive director.

A search is underway for that executive director, who will be hired in the next few months. There will also be deputy directors in both the New York and Los Angeles offices and a development director. Red Wing will continue as the field director and liaison to the other chapters.

Both cities will continue to maintain a local GLAAD council to maintain local media contacts, coordinate volunteers and put on media awards events held annually in each city.

During a transition period expected to last about two years, the national board will consist of representatives from the merged chapters and the

eight outlying chapters in Atlanta, Dallas, San Diego, Denver, Kansas City, San Francisco, Chicago and Washington, D.C. Eventually, the country will be divided into regions, with each region selecting a board member.

The local chapters that didn't merge will continue to operate autonomously, with logistical support from the national staff.

"I think we realize that having an organization where all the decisions are made in the confines of Manhattan or Los Angeles would not be an effective way of dealing with the heartland issues," says Carl Lange, executive director of GLAAD/Atlanta.

"But this is going to have a significant effect in terms of providing technical support."

"Our job will be to listen to folks and offer assistance if they ask for it," says Red Wing.

Eventually, GLAAD hopes to strengthen those eight chapters so that they can serve as centers for their regions, providing support to GLAAD groups formed in smaller cities, says Red Wing, who has been traveling to those outlying chapters in recent weeks to develop long-range strategic plans. Each region may also eventually have its own field director to provide similar help to the smaller outposts, she says.

In November, GLAAD received a \$300,000 grant from the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation to help fund its reorganization—one of the largest grants ever given by a private foundation to a lesbian and gay group.



Donna Red Wing