

Emphasizing diversity

NGLTF to counter GOP majority with liberal alliances

by Richard Shumate

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force plans to deal with the United States' swing to the right by emphasizing grass-roots organizing and by strengthening coalitions with other groups adversely affected by the GOP agenda.

That vision for the NGLTF, as outlined by its new executive director, Melinda Paras, was endorsed by the group's board of directors at a meeting in Atlanta on Jan. 28. It was the board's first meeting since Paras' controversial appointment was made in December.

"I think it's important to say that the Republican majority is not good for the gay and lesbian community," says Paras. "That doesn't mean that we're saying that all Republicans are anti-gay."

Calling the GOP's "Contract with America" a "Contract on America," Paras says the task force will try to link issues seemingly ancillary to lesbian and gay rights, such as immigration and welfare reform, to the lesbian and gay community's

The approach of NGLTF in the new Republican era contrasts with the approach taken by the other large national lesbian and gay rights group, the Human Rights Campaign Fund.

Since the election, HRCF has been running newspaper ads pointing out its view that gay and lesbian rights are a nonpartisan issue. Lobbyists for the group have also been approaching the members of Congress and its new leaders, including House Speaker Newt Gingrich, with the same message.

But, given the influence of the religious right with members of the new GOP majority, Paras says she doesn't believe lobbying members of Congress is the most effective approach.

"I don't think the Republican majority is very interested in the gay vote. They owe much more to the religious right than they do to the Log Cabin Republicans," she says. Instead, NGLTF will emphasize strengthening grass-roots gay and lesbian groups in the districts of members of Con-

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agenda by emphasizing the community's diversity—that gay men and lesbians are also members of these groups under attack. And, Paras told the board, making alliances with these other groups is consistent with the task force's traditional philosophy of progressive grass-roots organizing.

"Part of our challenge is to strive for what kind of world we want to build," says Paras. "Lesbian and gay rights will not get won in an atmosphere where other people are being deprived of their rights."

With a show of hands, the members of the board endorsed Paras' vision for the NGLTF's political agenda, including alliances with other liberal political groups.

"We need to show up at the door and say, 'How can we help and what can we do,'" says Deborah Johnson-Rolon, one of the board's two co-chairs.

But even Paras admits that it may be hard to rally the entire community to get involved in issues and fights that would seem to be outside the struggle for gay and lesbian rights.

"Our community is not always cognizant of who it is. There are portions of the gay and lesbian community that will say, 'That's not an attack on me,'" says Paras.

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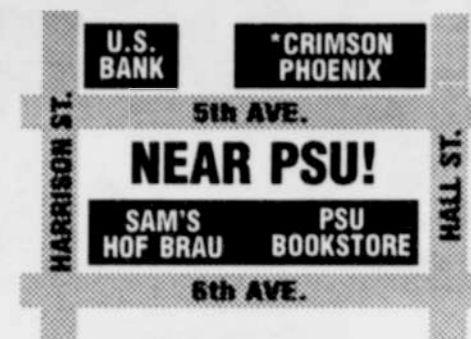


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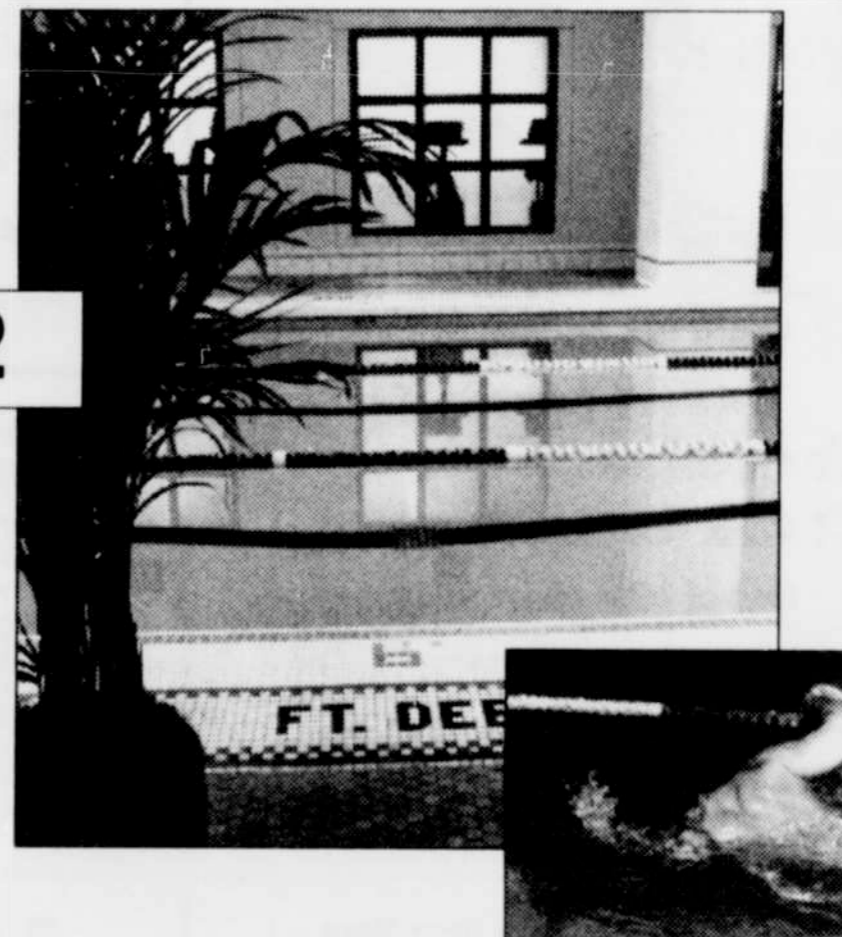
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