

# Distinct visions

Gunderson and Vaid debate before 400 lesbian and gay journalists at an NLGJA convention in Washington, D.C.

by Richard Shumate

**B**eyond being gay, Urvashi Vaid and Steve Gunderson would seem to have precious little in common.

He's a Republican congressman, pal of Newt Gingrich, and hero to Log Cabiners everywhere. She's an activist, admirer of Malcolm X and Gloria Steinem, and critic of the evils of unfettered capitalism. But in speeches before the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association's annual convention in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 21, they curiously agreed on one thing, though for different reasons: Gay men and lesbians should not look to the federal government in Washington—or the Democratic Party—for their liberation.

"I believe the gay movement must restructure to build itself up in each and every state," said Vaid, the former executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, whose new book, *Virtual Equality*, takes an in-depth look at the gay-rights movement. "We're just not there yet. But we can be."

Vaid said that the conservative shift of the federal government means that gay men and lesbians may have more political success by devoting time and resources to local candidates and issues. She blasted the national Democratic Party for its failure to more effectively oppose the conservative political agenda now rolling through the halls of Congress.

"I am not a Democrat anymore. I think the Democratic Party is failing the people who supported it," she said.

Gunderson said gay men and lesbians should look more to the private sector for protections from discrimination.

While he supports federal legislation outlawing employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, he said the community should not wait for government action but should work to get major corporations to take that step on their own. He suggested using economic methods similar to those used by apartheid opponents to pressure businesses not to invest in South Africa during the 1980s.

Gunderson also said gay men and lesbians should not fear the current anti-government attitude in the U.S. electorate, as expressed in the 1994 elections.

"Anti-government does not mean anti-gay," said Gunderson. He also said he believes his Republican Party isn't inherently hostile to gay men and lesbians and that the community needs to be more tolerant toward people who do not hold to a liberal political line.

"If the Republican Party has room for a Newt Gingrich and a [Massachusetts Governor] Bill Weld, if the Democratic Party has room for a Sam Nunn and a Ted Kennedy, then the gay community has room for an Andrew Sullivan, a Steve Gunderson and an Urvashi Vaid," he said. "I think it is a big mistake for the gay and lesbian community to suggest that they should be in one party and one party only."

He cited Bob Dole's decision, after much

criticism, to reverse himself on accepting a campaign contribution from the Log Cabin Republicans as evidence that the tide of history has changed and that homophobia is no longer good politics, not even in the GOP. Gay and lesbian political activists need to realize that the political climate has changed as well, he said.

"It's not 1984 anymore," Gunderson said. "I don't believe Malcolm X and Gloria Steinem are at the center of the political debate in 1995."

Retorted Vaid: "I do understand it's not 1984 anymore. [In 1984], I was there, working in the gay and lesbian rights movement." She added that progress made by gay men and lesbians in the past decades is the result of the hard work of people within the movement, "not some cosmic force of history and certainly not the Republican Party."

But despite her profound disappointment with the Democrats and pointed disagreement with the GOP, Vaid said she thinks it would be a mistake for gay men and lesbians to simply give up on the political process in 1996. She called the prospect "frightening" and said that despite her displeasure

with the Clinton administration, the president's re-election is in the community's best interests, given the current political climate.

"I'm tired of [the administration's] platitudes. But I will say that I think that they have done a lot," she said. "They have provided access.... But I don't think our equality will be won by getting in the door and getting access."

During the convention in Washington, D.C., NLGJA celebrated its fifth anniversary. Started in 1990 by six journalists sitting around a dining room

table in Piedmont, Calif., the group now has more than 1,200 members in 18 chapters. At a board meeting during the convention, a Canadian chapter was granted admission, turning the organization international.

During the four days lesbian and gay journalists were in the capital, the Clinton administration announced its endorsement of federal legislation outlawing employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. NLGJA President Roy Aarons cited that timing, as well as a recent 10-minute on-air attack of NLGJA by televangelist Pat Robertson, as evidence of the group's impact during its short lifetime.

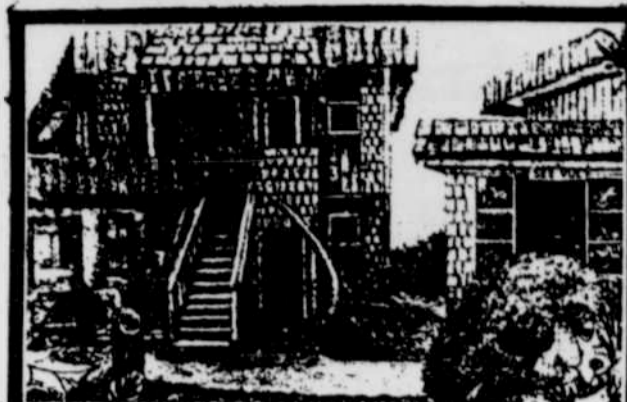
"Many of us are out in our newsrooms now, fighting for fair and accurate representations of gays and lesbians," said Aarons.

The Human Rights Campaign hosted a Capitol Hill reception for the journalists, at which U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) gave a rousing denunciation of "mean-spirited" attacks on gay men and lesbians from Jesse Helms and his compatriots on the political right.

"When I came to the Senate, I did not expect that these human rights issues would for me become such important issues," said Wellstone. "We do not intend to retreat. We will stand up. We will organize. We will have nothing to do with the politics of hate."



Urvashi Vaid



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