

# national news

## Change at the top

With the departure of NGLTF head Melinda Paras, former deputy director Kerry Lobel steps up to the helm

by Bob Roehr

**C**reating Change" is the annual training conference run by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which was held Nov. 8-10. This year's conference united a record number of activists—more than 2,500—in Washington, D.C., for three days of seminars and workshops.

The Task Force also created some change of its own: It announced that deputy director Kerry Lobel would step up to become its executive director on Dec. 1, replacing Melinda Paras.

Lobel grew up in the San Fernando Valley, but she is definitely not your stereotypical Valley Girl. True, at 43 there is an easy laugh and shoulder-length chestnut hair, but there is also a rigor to her thought and a matter-of-fact intensity at her core which is pure activist.

A silver six-pointed "Deputy" badge marks her office door and just inside a life-size cardboard cutout of Dorothy, Toto and the Cowardly Lion greets you. It is a bittersweet reminder of family tradition, fun and tragedy, taken from her brother's office this summer after his suicide.

*Blood Sport*, that recounting of Whitewater misdeeds, lies on the desk. It was her companion during jury duty the previous day and evoked strong memories of 10 years in Arkansas prior to joining the Task Force.

### Roehr: What shaped your politics?

Lobel: I came out in 1971 on the UCLA campus at a time when the feminist and anti-war movements were very vibrant there. Most of the people I knew were lesbians, there was really not the kind of stigma that many people have coming out.

In my own family it was much more difficult; they were upset. I knew that they would be, but I didn't anticipate how difficult it would be. We were estranged for many years and the message from them was that I couldn't—shouldn't—bring my full self to my family's table. It was very, very difficult. But I'm very grateful that over a period of time that changed, they became more accepting of my lesbian identity.

### In the last few years you've lost both your brother and your father. That's a tough load to handle.

It is a tough load to handle. I was very fortunate that when my father died we had a very clean relationship. The unintended consequence of my father's death, which was from an accident, was that it really forced my mother and myself into much more closeness. Sometimes it takes a tragedy.

Then my brother died this year in June; it was and it is a very painful thing. So it was very important to me that my mother be there for me around this job. I'm not sure it would be her choice that I would lead a national gay and lesbian organization, but there it is. On the one hand it's, well, why do you have to do that? And on the other hand, let me keep your scrapbook.

### Yes, the old tension, "Don't let the neighbors know, but I'm proud of you."

### What drew you to battered women's issues?

Sometimes you are in a place at a particular period of time when something falls in your lap. I happened to be sitting in the Women's Resource Center at UCLA one day and a staff member came in who had been abused by a husband or partner, and needed a resource.

I love battered women's issues because you can talk about abuse, you can talk about housing, child care, welfare, raise economics. You can't

talk about women's abuse without the matrix. So it really framed my politics that I was working on an issue that connected with so many other issues.

### How did you end up in Arkansas?

I followed love, followed adventure. Moved there in 1984, did some consulting, edited a book [on battered women]. I love Arkansas. It was everything that, as an organizer, was perfect. It was accessible. It was, have an idea and encourage people to come along. There weren't the type of turf issues that I experienced in Southern California.

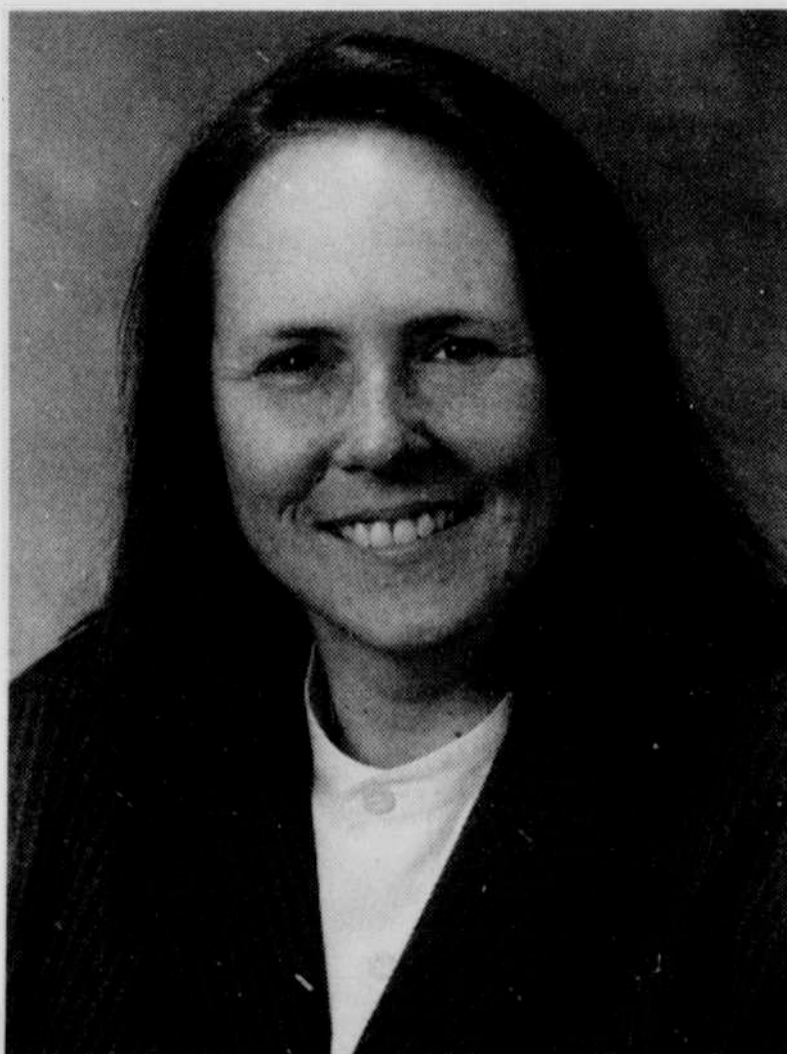
I started working for the women's project, did a lot of HIV and AIDS work with women working

phone rang and someone said, could you take this call. And I never stopped after that. I had worked nights doing prison work, but I never really had a job where every minute of every day I was completely on the run. That surprised me.

### It sounds like the transition to executive director is a homecoming of sorts.

It is. When I left Southern California I was very clear, I was never being an executive director again. It is too much responsibility. And then I realized when I came to the Task Force as deputy that you have as much responsibility for people's lives, but you don't have the control.

Melinda and I have had a wonderful relation-



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—Kerry Lobel

as prostitutes, prisoners—a lot of technical assistance with women's organizations.

[I] helped support and nurture gay and lesbian organizations. I was able to fill my plate with lots of different issues that made connections and linkages.

I was about to go on a six-month paid sabbatical and decided to go to Creating Change in Dallas. I thought it would be a great place to meet people, see what was happening, and think about what I wanted to do with my life.

I found out the Task Force was going to hire Melinda [Paras], and she was looking for a deputy. And I said, that would be fun. I didn't know her from anybody. Went there, we met, connected fairly well. And I moved here the first of January [1995].

### Was it what you expected?

No, not at all.

### How was it different?

I didn't know when I came here that I would spend so much time being the internal person. I had always been much more the external person. I knew I was coming in to do the day-to-day, but I didn't realize how hard that would be for me as a person, to be the inside person as opposed to the outside person.

I really didn't understand what the pace of work would be. I literally walked in the door, I had gotten off the plane and had my bags in hand, the

ship, but at the same time, when you have been an executive director you know what you would do. I know how to do the public stuff, I know how to ask for money. Clearly now I know all the program, the people, the board and staff.

### You mentioned that wonderful word "control." How will things be different with you as executive director?

I hope that people will see more visibility for the Task Force. I'm much more interested in figuring out a way to do visibility, public stuff, and making sure the internal stuff is in sync.

There will be more campaigning around specific issues, developing linkages with allies in our struggle for social justice, doing that in a visible way that supports local and state organizing.

### Some people say the Task Force has an identity crisis. Do you think that is a fair assessment?

I think our mission is clear. Whether we have made that clear in a visible way, I don't know. The Task Force is a progressive organization that works the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community to make social change. We do that through a number of vehicles, primarily by strengthening local and state organizations.

Now people may have a hard time with that agenda, they may not agree with that agenda, and we may not always be as effective as I would like us to be in moving a progressive social-change

agenda. But I think that people generally know that is what we are about.

### Some have criticized NGLTF for dropping programs like anti-violence.

We never stopped doing anti-violence organizing, what changed was a one-person, on-project approach. Now as people think back, oh wasn't it great when we had so-in-so doing anti-violence or campus organizing. Well, yes, unless they were off that day, or sick, or on travel. As a local organizer in Arkansas I often found myself doing anti-violence work, needing to have some basic information, calling the Task Force and not being able to get it because that person was gone. Now anyone who calls here can get the info they need.

What we are going to be doing next year is working with organizers at the local and state levels to develop issue campaigns that help move an agenda. We can develop [public service announcements], ad slicks, make information accessible to them, other resources so they don't have to start over. People will see much more issue advocacy in more integrated campaigns in areas of anti-violence, issues related to sodomy, and family issues.

Also, I really want the Task Force to build relationships with faith-based communities. That is really important to me and to our movement organizationally. There are many queer people in traditional denominations, and we have many queer denominations as well. They are not in dialogue with each other, and they are not in dialogue with national political organizations. Many of them have a progressive agenda.

### To some people that would seem incongruous because of the Task Force's strong feminist anti-patriarchy tradition, and the traditional view of organized religion as being a patriarchal nature and structure. How would you convince them this makes sense?

Living in the South as I did for 10 years, most of the people that I knew were connected with some faith-based community. It was a source of important strength to them, and joy and hope. And their struggle was to bring their full self there. If we want people to be able to live a full life, then we have to work with them to find that full life where they find it, not where someone else in Washington, D.C., or L.A., or New York thinks they should find it.

Many of these denominations gave birth to the civil rights movement. People of faith know that a very real and authentic struggle for social change is happening within their denominations. It is where some of the hardest issues of our time are being hashed out. So people who go to synagogue, or go to church, or worship in other ways already understand that fundamental shift is happening.

Our job is to be able to have people bring their whole selves to the table and not feel that to be a gay person they have to settle for less, or that they have to be like everyone else.

We have to figure out a way to honor our experience and never forget the hurt that many of us had inflicted on us. But at the same time we have to work for a society in which other people don't have to put up with that.

### Get over it, move on.

The way that we move on is not to feel better as individual people, it is to change the institutions that rule our lives. They are going to take profound changing and challenging. I think the Task Force understands that has to be a multifaceted and multi-issue approach, no one way can work.