

A shining night

Political stars come out for NGLTF event;
Coretta Scott King receives 'Honoring Our Allies' award

by Bob Roehr

U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy's rousing introduction, Coretta Scott King's moving acceptance, or Vice President Al Gore's "surprise" appearance—which was the highlight? The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force certainly had much to choose from during its recent "Honoring Our Allies" gala held in Washington, D.C.

"We work to build a progressive movement, one that respects and celebrates the diversity of human expression and identity. We of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people are part of a broader movement for social justice and freedom," Kerry Lobel, NGLTF's executive director, told the crowd of more than 200 during the Sept. 15 gathering.

"The heart of our work is a federation of over 30 statewide organizations, representing the fact that the center of gravity has shifted from Washington, D.C.—in fact it was never here—to the states," she said, pointing to New Hampshire and Maine as the latest states to enact legal protection for lesbians and gay men. "Now 25 percent of the people living in this country are covered by such laws."

Kennedy, the longtime Democratic senator from Massachusetts and co-sponsor of the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, brought up the anti-gay Jesse Helms and the Christian Coalition to rouse the crowd. The mere mention of those names—coupled with his booming voice—did the trick and energized the room.

Kennedy's role, meanwhile, was to introduce the main recipient of the evening's awards.

"Tonight we honor a person who carries forward her husband's dream that injustice anywhere threatens justice anywhere—[a person] who understands completely that you cannot separate discrimination. When discrimination is there in any form and in any shape, it must be rooted out," he said in introducing Coretta Scott King, widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

In accepting her award, King said, "It's hard to believe that in 1997, I still get criticism for speaking out against discrimination and bigotry towards people because of their sexual orientation.... All I can do is tell these folks that the civil rights movement that I believe in thrives on unity and inclusion, not division and exclusion."

King's niece, Alveda King, made a series of anti-gay comments during media appearances in mid-August, in which she compared gay men and lesbians to "liars, thieves, murderers [and] child molesters" and warned that protecting gay men and lesbians from discrimination would "give a death sentence to civil rights." She also claimed her late uncle would have opposed lesbian and gay rights legislation.

Coretta Scott King, however, countered that notion.

"I accept this award as a reaffirmation of my commitment to carry forward the unfinished work of my husband, Martin Luther King Jr. My husband understood that all forms of discrimination and persecution were unjust and unacceptable for a great democracy.... I want to reaffirm my determination to secure the fullest protection of the law for all working people, regardless of their sexual orientation.... It is right, just and good for America," she said.

King also acknowledged the contributions gay men and lesbians have historically made to the civil rights movement.

"Many of these courageous men and women were fighting for my freedom at a time when they could find few voices for their own, and I will always remember and honor their contributions," she said. "It has been encouraging to see the growing participation of people of color in the leadership ranks of the lesbian and gay freedom struggle, and I urge you to continue making this movement a model of diversity."

King is the founder and former chair, president and chief executive officer of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta.

Lobel said, "Mrs. King has stood shoulder to shoulder with us as we work to envision and



Coretta Scott King

create a world based on social justice. She embraces the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people as part of the continued legacy of Dr. King's brave work. Her progressive vision of peace and justice echoes around the world."

Kennedy and King departed and the crowd grew restless waiting for Gore to show. During the interim, Lobel stepped to the microphone and said, "As you know, [NGLTF] has not always agreed with everything the administration does. But I can say with all candor and sincerity that we deeply appreciate the willingness that Vice President Gore has shown to hearing our concerns."

When he got there, Gore was effective in warming up an audience liberally seeded with gay and lesbian members of the administration.

"It is time for all Americans to recognize that the issues that face gays and lesbians in this country are not narrow special interests, they are matters of basic human and civil rights," he said. "It is not enough for you to have a seat at the table. Everybody has got to realize that as full members of the American family, it's your table too."

Gore added that he and the president are "very strongly committed" to doing what they can with respect to gay issues. He was short on specifics, however.

"Let's face it, some of the greatest challenges that we face are not challenges of law but challenges of the heart," he said.



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