

QUICK EXIT

Executive director leaves Human Rights Campaign

by Bob Roehr

Cheryl Jacques is stepping down as president of the Human Rights Campaign after less than a year on the job.

Announcement of Jacques' resignation, over "differences in management philosophy" between her and the HRC governing boards, came in a statement released by the organization late Nov. 30. The initiative for change appears to have come from the boards.

"It just didn't work out," said Vic Basile, a former executive director of HRC who co-chaired the search committee that hired Jacques. "Cheryl has a lot of strengths and she's a good person, but on balance, it wasn't working for her and it wasn't working for us. This was a good time to resolve it, in the lull between the election and when the new Congress comes in."

Jacques cited defeat of the Federal Marriage Amendment and increasing the HRC budget to \$30 million and membership to 600,000 as among her accomplishments. All parties denied any link to results from the Nov. 2 election.

The co-chairs of HRC's board of directors will lead the organization during the transition



Cheryl Jacques: Gone in 60 seconds

until a new executive director is in place. Michael Berman is president of the Duberstein Group, a Washington lobbying firm. Hillary Rosen is the former head of the Recording Industry Association of America. She was a consultant to HRC on the Federal Marriage Amendment and is the spouse of former HRC executive director Elizabeth Birch.

Jacques, 42, resigned from the Massachusetts Senate to join HRC. She had never lived outside the Boston area, had been publicly out for only 3 1/2 years, had not worked extensively within the gay community and did not have experience working at the national level.

The search committee did not believe those would be significant impediments when they hired her. However, they did prove to contribute to her limited effectiveness on the job.

One Capitol Hill lobbyist was appalled to learn in a conversation with Jacques, after three to four months on the job, that she did not know that U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., was the lead Republican sponsor of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, the crown jewel in HRC's legislative agenda.

HRC later endorsed Specter's Democratic opponent in the general election, even though

he was a huge underdog in that race. Philadelphia Gay News publisher Mark Segal, active in Democratic politics in Pennsylvania for decades, said HRC would have been "smart" to either not endorse in the race or to have issued a dual endorsement.

Specter won convincingly and is slated to chair the Judiciary Committee, which has jurisdiction over much of the legislation important to HRC.

The lobbyist said that as a result of such missteps, several Republican Senate offices formerly friendly to HRC have become decidedly icy.

The departure of longtime senior employees was a major source of unhappiness for several HRC board members. Among those leaving were Kim Mills, who headed up workplace and education activities, and Harvey Hurdle, the chief financial officer. Other senior employees have expressed their unhappiness with Jacques and were contemplating leaving.

"I'm rejoicing. She was totally clueless. She was in so far over her head," Michael Bauer said in response to the news of Jacques' departure. He is a gay Democratic political consultant and fund-raiser in Chicago. He served on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which supports openly gay candidates for office.

Carl Schmid, former head of the Washington, D.C., chapter of Log Cabin Republicans and a former HRC advisory committee member, criticized the partisan tone that HRC took during the last election cycle. He said, "The slogan 'George W. Bush, you're fired' made it difficult for some Republicans to support HRC. It doesn't do anything to educate Americans about same-sex marriage."

The HRC boards are scheduled to meet in Las Vegas during the weekend of Dec. 4, with hiring a new executive director sure to top their agenda.

One option is to return to the applicant pool from a year ago. Winnie Stachelberg, HRC's longtime political director, was among the three finalists. She is highly respected for her political acumen and lobbying talents.

However, the skills that work best inside the Beltway may not be the same ones that work best outside the Beltway. The executive director plays a leading role in raising money, public speaking and articulating a vision before the gay and mainstream communities. Some have made the comparison with John Kerry, whose skills made him an excellent policy wonk but a less effective campaigner.

"I'm a passionate Democrat," said Bauer, "but in case anybody hasn't noticed, we lost. This is a time to be embracing Republicans."

He thought it would be "a really smart move" for HRC to hire a Republican, or at least someone who can talk to Republicans. "As much as I don't like the Bush administration, they are going to be there for four years, and we need to find someone who can play with the current administration."

Bauer dismissed the possibility that HRC might hire recently out and recently resigned New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey. "We can't hire anyone with an ethical cloud over their head," as McGreevey does with putting his boyfriend on the state payroll. And there has to be some history of involvement in the community. 

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