

northwest

The Patriot

ACLU's chief out in front on rights

by Jaymee R. Cuti

On Sept. 4, 2001, Anthony Romero, a gay man born to immigrant parents from Puerto Rico, took the helm of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Seven days later, with the collapse of the World Trade Center, his organization ascended in relevance.

Romero, the first Latino and openly gay leader of the organization, came to Portland on March 3 to honor Portland attorney Elden Rosenthal, recipient of the MacNaughton Award for a lifelong commitment to civil liberties.

Prior to his visit, Romero spoke with *Just Out* about gay rights, the war on terror and collaborating with the opposition.

Jaymee R. Cuti: How has the ACLU's work affected your life as a gay Latino man?

Anthony Romero: I've been the beneficiary of decades of the ACLU's work. It's both an enormous privilege to be leader of this organization at this time and a tribute to the organization's long-standing work that we've made the impact that we have made.

JRC: What are the ACLU's priorities in 2007?

AR: Maintaining civil liberties in the context of the war on terror is a big priority—restoring the rights to habeas corpus, ensuring that detainees have the basic due process of law.

Marriage equality is a very important priority for us. We care and have done an enormous amount of work with gay and lesbian families, where the law treats gay and lesbian families as strangers. The whole focus on discrimination and inequality from the gay and lesbian front or traditional questions about racial discrimination is the second priority.

Third is the priority that the government stay out of the business of religion. We protect and believe in the right of freedom of religion. At the same time, we don't believe the government should be in the business of promoting religion. Promoting a particular religious viewpoint becomes a shell game for discrimination. We've had a number of cases that deal with after-school programs or abstinence-only sex education classes

where taxpayers' money is being used to further a particular belief, often to the detriment of gays and lesbians.

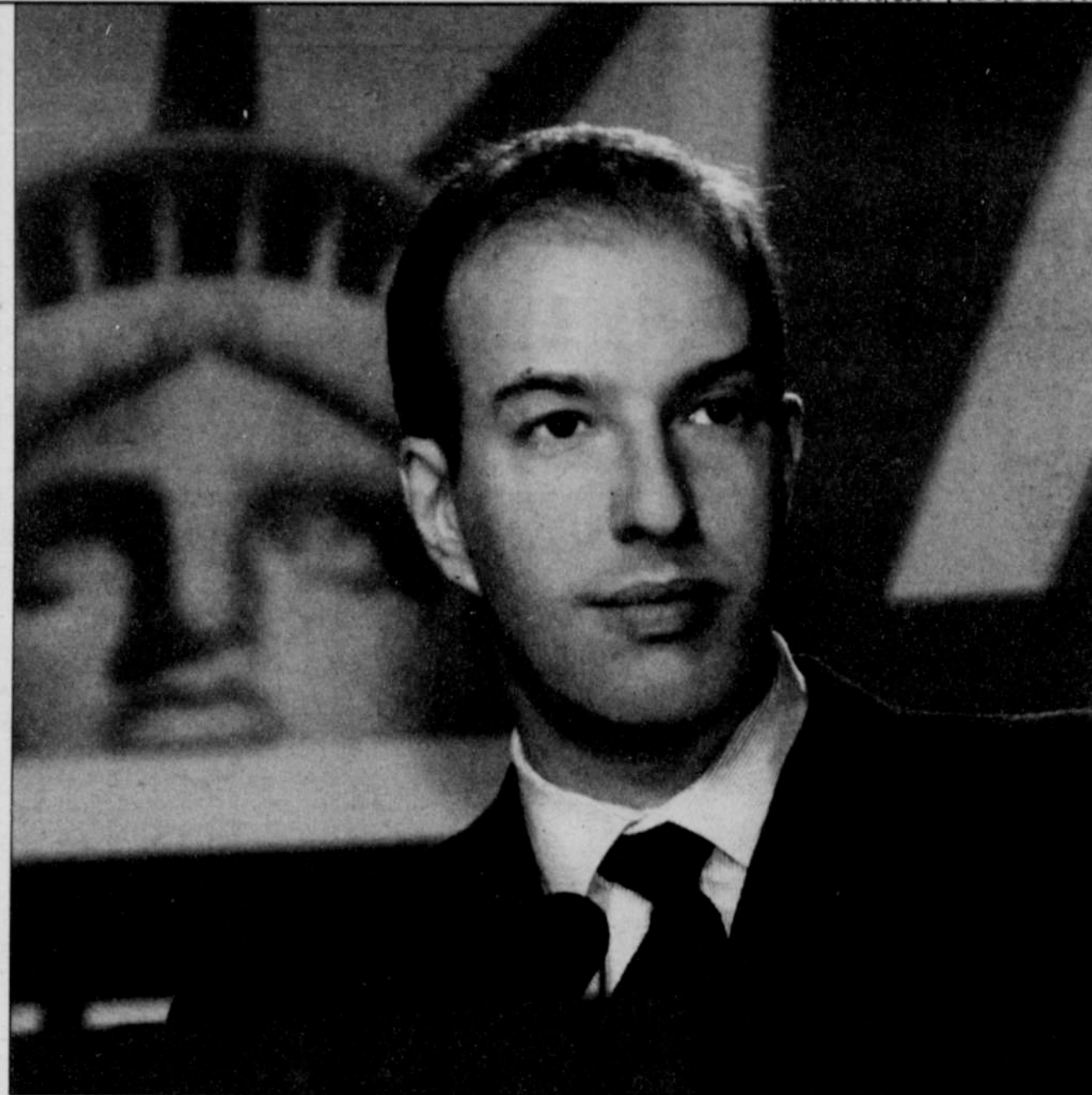
JRC: What is your strategy regarding taking on a drafter of the Defense of Marriage Act, deposed Georgia Congressman Bob Barr, as a consultant?

AR: I think what's important is that ACLU doesn't change its principles or values for anybody. We always have believed in the right of gay people to marry. We believe in a woman's right to choose. We believe in the right to live free from discrimination. That has not changed no matter who we hire as a consultant. It's also important that we don't have litmus tests for our allies. While Bob Barr and I completely disagree on some issues, we very much agree on issues about privacy or the issue of the war on terror. I've been keen on working with the Republican Party to show that a concern for civil liberties is not just a province of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, [but] that the concern for civil liberties cuts across the political spectrum.

It's fair to say that creating a working relationship with some conservative leaders and groups has led to better working relationships. I think it's notable that Bob Barr spoke out against a constitutional amendment on marriage because he did not feel that was the right thing to do to endorse discrimination. I would like to believe that's the progress of us working together. That's the power of a concern for the civil liberties of all people. It's something that all Americans can get behind.

JRC: Under your leadership, the ACLU has experienced its largest membership growth in the organization's history and more than doubled the budget and national staff. How are you taking advantage of these resources?

AR: Up until this point, our offices have been in states that have the largest number of members. Now we're building offices where the needs are greater. We are building a much bigger office in Texas. We will double the staff in the next year and a half [in] Florida, Mississippi, Montana, New Mexico, Michigan, Missouri. We're trying to fill out the grid so we can take advantage of our on-the-ground presence in the states and really make



Anthony Romero, executive director of the ACLU, spoke in Portland about our responsibility to defend our rights.

a unique contribution. I think that's been the first big change.

Second is we've been trying to reach out to a broader American public and educate the public about what civil liberties actually mean. We have a first-ever television series, *The Freedom Files* on Court TV and next on PBS, where we talk about what these cases mean, tell the stories of ordinary people.

The third big piece is bringing the many lawsuits in response to the Bush administration's war on terror—everything from torture and detention to surveillance to rendition, the use of kidnapping of citizens from foreign countries.

JRC: To what degree is the ACLU involved with the ongoing fight in Oregon for gay civil rights?

AR: It's a battle that we engaged almost three years ago. We were very disappointed when it played out the way that it did. It requires our continued energy because it's an ongoing conversation in Oregon. The legal work and public education are still critical for us. I've very proud of the fact

that our local office has been as involved as it is on the fight for gay equality in Oregon.

JRC: What will you be discussing at the MacNaughton Award dinner?

AR: I have a book coming out in May, *The Defense of Our America: The Fight for Civil Liberties in the Age of Terror* about why civil liberties matter to ordinary people. Both in the book and in the speech, I communicate a sense that this is our struggle. Ordinary people encounter injustices every day in their lives—from gay rights issues in Kansas to abortion issues in South Dakota, to the intelligent design issue in Pennsylvania, to the war on terror; to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on poor African Americans. Part of what I want to do in the speech and the book is talk about the importance of defending everyone's civil rights, of standing up and challenging these injustices and showing that ordinary people play a really important role in protecting and ensuring rights. It's not just our right to speak up against the government. It's also our responsibility. It's what it means to be a patriot. **JO**

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