



Sharing Strength

Lambda Legal Executive Director **Kevin Cathcart** and **Deepak Bhargava**, executive director of D.C.'s Center for Community Change, talk about why immigration is an urgent LGBT issue.

DEEPAK BHARGAVA: The Center for Community Change was founded in 1968 as a living memorial to Robert Kennedy—by people in the civil rights movement, the labor movement and the war on poverty. Its mission is to support grassroots community organizing in low-income communities and communities of color all over the country, and to enable low-income people to have a voice in the policies that affect our lives.

Currently we are working in four areas, including affordable housing; unemployment; a recently launched campaign to save and improve Social Security (although not widely understood as such, it's the largest anti-poverty program in the country's history) and our longest standing campaign, immigration reform, which for us means legalization of the undocumented, the ability for immigrants in the United States to bring close family members to the United States and a variety of other things such as the Dream Act.

I know people in the LGBT movement feel like it's an incredibly hard slog, but at a little bit of a remove, it's so exciting to see the speed at which the country is going through a cultural and legal transformation.

I think the LGBT movement is one of the few progressive social justice movements that is really moving the country in the right direction. The work that the LGBT movement has done on every front, from legal and legislative to cultural, offers a good model for the immigrant rights movement.

CATHCART: It's interesting, because inside the LGBT movement, people are incredibly frustrated by how slowly things go. We can't even get ENDA to pass, and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is not really gone yet. When you're in the middle of it, there is something to be learned from other peoples' perspectives. But I also think it says something about how much of a disconnect there often is between people who are primarily LGBT or HIV activists, and the other movements that are all out there.

One of the challenges that we face as a mainstream LGBT rights organization is: How do we bring in our supporters on broader issues? It is not clear to everybody who exactly our community is. We can explain that LGBT people who are not legalized are often afraid to report hate crimes, fight job or housing

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discrimination, report police abuse or stand up for their own civil rights, which will have an impact on all other LGBT people. The same thing is true for people with HIV. Because the risks are too great. Are you going to report housing discrimination if you think you're going to be deported?

BHARGAVA: I think the first and most important reason why immigration reform should be such a priority for the LGBT community is that

a large and growing part of the LGBT population is in fact newcomers to the United States. They face a special set of challenges, in addition to the challenges that LGBT people already living here face—for instance, they're more likely to have a same-sex partner or spouse from outside the U.S., whom they need to be able to petition to come to the U.S. or stay here, but can't. And LGBT immigrants who are in detention, particularly transgender immigrants, are often subjected to horrendous conditions and abuse. At the level of moral commitment, every movement has to ask the question, are we really for everybody? Core immigration issues like providing a path to citizenship for 12 million undocumented people in the United States are gay issues because there are so many LGBT people for whom it is the single most transformative thing that could be done to improve their lives. At the level of politics, this constituency is gaining in numbers and clout. And the LGBT agenda in political terms will ultimately be in the hands of this newly empowered constituency.

Also, immigration reform really is crucial for the future of our country. It's part of our identity, that we are a nation of immigrants—and welcoming. It's part of the American genius, it's part of prosperity, it's part of how the country is renewed, with new ideas, new talent, new visions.

The last thing I'll say is it's equally important that the immigrant rights community embrace the LGBT agenda, and that is just as challenging and just as fraught with difficulty.

CATHCART: I have always suspected that LGBT people may be over-represented in immigrant populations, because there are good reasons perhaps for gay people to leave a lot of places in this world and to try to come here. There is this sort of magnet effect that the United States has, and the more we succeed with an LGBT movement in general in this country, the sharper the contrast is between the United States and some other places. And that would cause people living in rougher conditions to decide it could be worth the trouble to come here.

But it's so hard to figure out even how many gay people there are and where we are, let alone in populations that have good reasons to stay somewhat underground. And it's a challenge around HIV-related work. While the epidemic is still heavily gay, it is also heavily people of color and heavily a poverty epidemic.

So how do you organize in communities where there's a variety of challenges, and things like language and culture are maybe the least

of it? Because people are staying underground and they're not necessarily out in the way that the LGBT movement or the HIV movement in general thinks of out?

“PROVIDING A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP IS A GAY ISSUE. FOR SO MANY LGBT PEOPLE, IT IS THE SINGLE MOST TRANSFORMATIVE THING THAT COULD BE DONE TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES.”

BHARGAVA: I think it's actually a very good hypothesis that there's a higher share of LGBT people in the immigrant community than in the country as a whole. It's certainly very striking, the extent to which, in the immigrant rights leadership and activism within the country, LGBT people are everywhere. It might be half queer young people who are leading that effort. And the borrowing from the LGBT movement in terms of the whole notion of coming out as undocumented is not accidental. You know, it really has to do with the echoes for those young people between their experience as queer and as undocumented.

CATHCART: Have you encountered any skepticism or misinformation in the LGBT community around immigration reform?

BHARGAVA: One thing I've heard occasionally is: Isn't the massive wave of immigration bringing lots of very socially conservative people to the United States, who are likely to oppose full equality for LGBT people? And my response to that typically is that immigrants who come to this country are in a certain structural position with regard to the broader society. They feel like outsiders. They have to navigate between cultures. And so I actually think there's tremendous openness in the immigrant community to the LGBT agenda. And that's especially true for the children of immigrants, or people who come as first-generation immigrants at a young age. My experience is they're quite sympathetic.

It is true that the Catholic Church and to an increasing extent evangelical churches are playing a very central role in the lives of many immigrants, and you know, it's been a very rough challenge, but I think we're kind of on the other side of it now. We have the leadership in the immigrant community speak up for equality for binational couples. It has not come without some real blow-backs.

The Catholic Church has been a major funder of immigrant rights work in the United States, and they have yanked funding from groups that have taken a stance for LGBT equality. But without

exception, all the groups that have faced that kind of choice have taken the right path and said, we won't take your money if it means that we can't speak for the entire immigrant community. So I think there's very good reason to be optimistic that there could be a real partnership between the LGBT community and the immigrant community.

The other myth that I would highlight is about immigration being bad for the economy. All the evidence actually suggests the opposite. There was a study by the Center for American Progress that showed that immigration reform would actually grow the economy by \$1.4 trillion over the next decade, in GDP growth, and substantially reduce the budget deficit because it would allow people to come forward and pay taxes. And the history of the country is that immigrants are pretty critical to innovation and entrepreneurship. You see that in major pockets of the economy like high tech.

CATHCART: So what would you say to a mainstream LGBT audience, not about *why* they should be involved but *how* they should be involved?

BHARGAVA: I think it's critical that organizations join forces at the state and local level, where the LGBT community and the immigrant community face the same opponents using the same tactics, from salary initiatives to horrendous laws. And that joining of forces is happening in some really exciting ways in places like California and Oregon.

Also, just as the LGBT community has advanced in part because straight people increasingly feel passionately about equality for LGBT friends and loved ones, the immigrant rights community is only going to advance when non-immigrant communities speak up in support.

To learn more about the Center for Community Change, visit communitychange.org. 