

Remembering Robert Bonvouloir Foster (1955–1991)

The generosity of this Chicago pioneer led to the founding of Lambda Legal’s Midwest Regional Office.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, “Bon” Foster, the late civil rights activist and attorney, died of AIDS at the age of 36. His life was short, but his passion, commitment and generosity were unforgettable to those who knew him.

Tina Tchen, chief of staff to First Lady Michelle Obama, spoke about him at Lambda Legal’s annual Bon Foster Civil Rights Celebration in April 2010. “Bon was fiercely demanding and wickedly funny,” said Tchen, who met him in 1978, when they worked together at the State’s Bureau of Budget in Springfield, Illinois. “Bon was always committed to equal justice, to the entire community being able to be who they are, to live out their full potential.”

After graduating first in his class at Northwestern University School of Law in 1987, Foster became a law clerk to U.S. District Judge Milton I. Shadur in Chicago. Later, he was a litigation associate at the Chicago firms of Jenner & Block and Schiff Hardin & Waite.

While at Northwestern, Foster became active in the gay and lesbian student organization. Seeing that Chicago still had no organization of legal professionals within its LGBT community, despite the city’s high number of lawyers and the fact that other cities had such groups, Foster became the prime mover in bringing together a core group of attorneys and law students to found the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago.

Throughout law school and his legal career, Foster was unfailingly candid and unapologetic about being gay. His forthright nature and proud stance served as a model to many, encouraging lawyers and other lesbian and gay persons to lead open lives. His personal strength and integrity, as well as the respect and love of his family, friends, and colleagues, helped to sustain Foster during his year-long and unrelenting battle against AIDS.

He challenged others to demand the best of themselves, just as he did



Foster (left) with his maternal grandmother, Nancy Bonvouloir

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of himself. “It was so like Bon to not only bequest the money to start the Midwest office of Lambda [Legal]—and to say, ‘If you don’t do that, you can’t have the money,’” said Tchen.

Through his bequest to Lambda Legal, the Midwest Regional Office (MRO) was opened in Chicago in 1993. The MRO has played an integral role in Lambda Legal’s national strategy and has helped expand its national presence. Some of the organization’s greatest achievements, including *Varnum v. Brien*, the historic lawsuit which brought marriage equality to Iowa—the first such victory in the Midwest—were led out of the Midwest Regional Office.

“He would be so proud of you,” Tchen said of Lambda Legal. “Change is what Bon was committed to, and change is what Lambda Legal is dedicated to.” **L**