

Victory on and off the Court



Lambda Legal Executive Director Kevin Cathcart and tennis legend and activist Billie Jean King discuss sports, role models and the *future of LGBT civil rights*.

Kevin Cathcart: An important part of Lambda Legal’s work is telling our stories to a broader audience. We want a wide range of people to understand the discrimination that our communities face. The groundbreaking work you did is about breaking through mythologies about women in sports, and our work is about breaking through mythologies about lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and people with HIV.

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— Kevin Cathcart

Billie Jean King: When I played against Bobby Riggs in 1973, in my mind it was to change the hearts and minds of the people watching. I knew it was not just a tennis match. I knew it was about social change. Athletes can inspire people with our stories and our actions, but the real heroes and heroines are the people in the trenches everyday. We all need to keep pushing forward, like Lambda Legal is doing, to make a difference.

KC: Lambda Legal has represented athletes a number of times, most recently with B. Koebeke and Kendall French in the Bernardo Heights golf club case in Southern California and Matthew Cusick in the Cirque du Soleil case. Here are these women who were not allowed to play golf together because they are lesbians. Here is a man who was not able to keep his job as an acrobat because of his HIV status. They’re Gay Games Champions this year — and you’re a Gay Games Ambassador.

BJK: I always support the Gay Games. I’m not going to be able to attend the Games this summer because World TeamTennis — our professional league of 12 teams — is on tour in July. But I’ve seen with World TeamTennis and the Gay Games how athletics can bridge people from all walks of life. I know it’s idealistic, but that is the way I want to live.

KC: And that’s the world we’re working for. We all need to stand together because let’s face it: LGBT people are never going to be a voting bloc that can win on our own. We are always going to be a small percentage and we need to bring along people of all stripes.

BJK: I have been saying that to the community forever. That is the way it is going to work, because we don’t have the numbers — and it is a numbers game. You’ve got to have over 50 percent of the people behind you. I know in the early eighties, the polls showed about 30 percent of people who approved of our

Photo above: Kevin Cathcart, Executive Director of Lambda Legal

Opposite page: Billie Jean King

Kevin Cathcart’s photo by Lisa Ross

Billie Jean King’s photo by Jodi Buren

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— *Billie Jean King*



“lifestyle.” Just this year, I think, it is up to 51 percent. When you get to that 51 percent, then things start to happen in the voting arena.

KC: And the stronger your support is, the more it builds on itself. People are not afraid to be on the right side anymore.

BJK: I think a lot of it is that we are becoming more comfortable in our own skin. When people see that, they relax. You will never have as good a quality of life unless you get rid of those barriers for your own personal well-being, and for everyone’s well-being.

KC: You’re right, and so much of Lambda Legal’s work is about making it safer for people to be out, to not have to hide. If you are worried that you are going to lose custody of your kids, you are going to think long and hard about being out, but if you know that the law is good in your state, then you have much more freedom to be matter-of-fact about who you are.

BJK: Secrets don’t work. I lost millions of dollars in sponsorships overnight when I was outed in 1981. Amelie Mauresmo, who is a lesbian and a French player, has not lost one. In fact, she has probably gained a couple because of it. I am so thrilled for her that she can have a life, feel safe and not have to hide. And I actually have started to be paid because I am a lesbian — I just signed with RainbowVision Properties, which is building communities for “the second 50 years.” I never would have dreamed this would be the case in 1981!

KC: The changes we’re seeing today are truly remarkable. I think one of the most amazing things of the last five to 10 years is gay-straight alliances and the work that young people are doing in high school to make it safe.

For many people my age or older, it is incomprehensible to think of high school as a safe space! Those GSAs are changing the thinking of an entire community of people who will, in a few years, be voters and, in a few more years, be leaders. We need to have a strong game plan for how we are getting to a world where discrimination goes away.

BJK: It would be nice if it actually could go away, if we didn’t need Lambda Legal anymore.

KC: Yes, I wish that could happen, but when I look at our major issue areas, the only one we were ever able to cross off was sodomy laws after we won the *Lawrence* case at the U.S. Supreme Court.

BJK: That was huge. Still, you’ve got to keep winning one conversation at a time, one law at a time. It won’t be in our lifetime that we will get rid of Lambda Legal, but you know what? We can make a difference while we are here. We set the foundation, and it is up to the next generation to keep building.

KC: We also have to remember what a short period of time we are talking about. From 1973 until today — whether we are talking about your match with Riggs or the founding of Lambda Legal — to us, it can feel like a long time, but when you look at history, it is an incredibly short time.

BJK: Kevin, when you read about it, it is short. When you live it, it is long.

KC: Exactly. But what I want to say to people is: Look, it is not always easy, but it is all possible. When people act like nothing is going to change, I think, open your eyes! Look how far we’ve come already. ■