

Gay & Lesbian Americans reaches beyond D.C., building membership electronically

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Contributing Writer

The new political group Gay and Lesbian Americans is experiencing growing pains. The embryonic national organization has only been in existence a few months. However, they have the commitment of a cadre of experienced activists from around the country working to get a foundation built for the future.

Without criticizing existing gay and lesbian political groups, Executive Action Team member Jon-Carl Lewis put GLA into national perspective saying, "We need to embrace different parts of the population. If people don't like what we're doing, then they need to come and bring friends and bring support. They can do that with our structure."

In January, a two-day leadership summit organized by Steven Reichert, Michael Petrelis, and others served as the catalyst for GLA formation. At that conference, a temporary structure emerged as did an initial platform and mission statement. The approximately 70 people there elected an Executive Action Team consisting of Reichert, national network coordinator; Mickey Wheatley, secretary-treasurer; Lewis, communications director; and Kim Edwards, membership outreach coordinator.

An interim steering committee was also put into place until the membership can be organized to elect a board of directors. The Board will consist of 21 members, including three at-large members who hopefully will represent those individuals doubly discriminated against. The Board will also have gender parity.

GLA hopes to fill a void perceived by some in the gay and lesbian activist community. Lewis sees it as a way to mobilize people who can speak to legislators in a quieter, more persuasive way. After attending last year's Creating Change conference, steering

committee member Ray Dries felt their was little hope for change in the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the group which organized the conference. Accordingly, he attended the January leadership summit and has signed on to GLA enthusiastically. He thinks the power of GLA is that the membership will directly elect the board, which is a more accurate reflection of the interests and concerns of the members. Dries went on to say that the principal officers in Washington "will be held accountable for fulfilling the policies that are set by the membership." This is in sharp contrast to what some call the top-heavy management style of some other gay and lesbian political groups.

On Valentine's Day, GLA held its first national action, "Queers Across America," in which 12 states around the country participated by holding press conferences. In New York the nascent GLA local held a press conference at City Hall that was attended by GLA members Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris. They also received local press and radio coverage. Lewis commented on the national action, saying it was good for the organization to get out and do something. He noted that they also realized just how limited their resources were. The Arizona chapter of GLA was among the first organizations which called for last month's boycott of Florida orange juice, after Rush Limbaugh was appointed as a spokesperson for the product. For now, GLA needs to organize and build its membership.

GLA is soliciting members in a variety of ways. A toll-free telephone number has been set up to provide information regarding membership. The group also communicates on-line via the Internet; sending a message to its automated email server will result in a return message about GLA. This information includes the mission statement and the 1994 interim working platform.

The GLA platform addresses two na-

tional issues and two state and local issues. To be effective the statement notes, "Our Grassroots Advocacy Network must rally behind a small and clearly defined agenda." A closed Internet list also exists for discussion among current GLA members.

From the beginning, GLA has been emphasizing their commitment to a diverse membership. By reaching out to the different parts of the gay and lesbian community, Lewis feels GLA can fill a niche that perhaps other groups have failed to speak to. He also noted that the D.C.-area black community is noticing GLA, since two of their Executive Action Team members are black.

Dries also remarked on the ability of GLA to speak with a stronger voice as its diversity increases. "What we need to be doing is to ensure that the membership as a whole reflects the diversity of our community and from that we will see the strength, see the representation of women and people of color, and other communities as well."

Although progress has been made since January, the organization is still in many ways the vision of its founders. Recently more pieces of the organizational framework were put in place. During a conference call on Feb. 28, the Executive Action Team and interim steering committee ratified a set of bylaws so the group can incorporate and apply for their nonprofit status. Once they have tax-exempt status, Lewis feels more people will be apt to donate large sums of money. Membership fees are set currently at \$35 per year, but lack of funds will not prevent anyone from becoming a member.

By some accounts, 1993 did not advance the gay and lesbian political agenda very successfully. In time, GLA may prove to be a group that can join forces with existing organizations and empower gays and lesbians in the struggle for civil rights. ▼

✓ Gay and Lesbian Americans: (800) 899-5111; Internet: gla-join@queernet.org.