



KEVIN M. CATHCART, BETH TEPER AND JENNIFER CHRISLER

Family Matters

Lambda Legal Executive Director Kevin Cathcart talks to Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of Family Equality Council, and Beth Teper, executive director of COLAGE, about changing the marriage-equality debate and putting families first.

The Selling of Fear

BETH TEPER: There are many places where LGBT families have come under attack. In schools, children are often teased, bullied and harassed because our families aren't seen as "real" families. In many of the marriage debates, we've turned on the TV and seen our families deemed "inappropriate" to be taught about in school. In Maine, one of our members said she was not allowed to refer to her parents as married. She was told her parents' anniversary was "just pretend." She was told she was born out of wedlock!

KEVIN CATHCART: What we saw in California and then again in Maine is that enough people still don't know us so that antigay television ads about kids can be really effective for opponents of marriage equality. The ads aimed to get parents nervous about having to talk to kids about gay sex, and even otherwise rational parents sometimes do get nervous.

CHRISLER: Those ads tapped into general uneasiness about culture and society, which ironically LGBT parents share with non-LGBT parents: What environment are we raising our kids in? How much exposure are they getting overall to violence and overtly sexual, mature themes?

TEPER: In California, commercials definitely have had a chilling effect. California has some of the most progressive Safe Schools protections in the country. Yet, after the anti-marriage equality ads aired, principals, administrators, and teachers really became confused about what they were able to teach and reported to Gay-Straight Alliance Network that they faced backlash about teaching subject matter that they are legally entitled to teach.

CATHCART: Part of the problem is that we're asking people to grapple with complicated feelings and come out for equality and against their own fears, and that's hard to do with a 30-second TV commercial. The other side's commercials don't have to be the best—they just have to push these still-sensitive emotional buttons for some of the conflicted people in the middle.

TEPER: By understanding the core fears activated by the right's messages we can develop new messages and reframe the debate. In California, there was some testing of ads in certain districts and in conservative districts. The ads showed a diversity of lesbian and gay people talking with and about their family members. Those districts are the ones that voted down Prop 8. We have some

evidence that exploring, testing and having more visibility of our families does have an impact on public opinion.

The Antidote to "Quick and Dirty"

CHRISLER: To counter these attacks, the Family Equality Council leverages the power and voice of LGBT families and parents in particular to do the very difficult work of changing hearts and minds in community settings. We connect with non-LGBT parents where they naturally show up, whether it's on the sidelines of a soccer field or basketball court or in their places of worship, and teach LGBT parents how to have the difficult conversations you need to have to engage people who may still be ambivalent. We have volunteers in regions who help us to train parents. We also have a national training and education manager who puts these trainings together.

TEPER: COLAGE combats discrimination by building communities of peers. Whether it's through the local chapters, online communities or family events or conferences, having shared experiences—you know, like events for LGBT cultural holidays or family holidays and occasions—helps combat isolation and invisibility. We also have our Speak OUT leadership program that supports children of LGBT families to grow into their own and give them tools to speak their mind. Through these opportunities, COLAGE helps people with LGBT parents become strong advocates for themselves and their families.



How has the antigay movement used children in the debate over marriage equality—and what are LGBT family advocates doing in response?

CHRISLER: There are so many things that we can do online, with social media and web 2.0 tactics that really empower people to tell their stories and do it on a much more grassroots level, one-on-one and in the networks that folks are already tied into. But people also underestimate the power of sending a letter to the editor in a local newspaper. I live in a community where everybody reads the letters to the editor and knows who's writing in, who will consistently bang the far-right drum and who will weigh in on the other side.

Putting Children Front and Center

CATHCART: I think it worked extremely well in Iowa to bring the children of some of our plaintiff couples in as plaintiffs in the case because they are really harmed by the discrimination directed at their parents. There's so much invisibility about LGBT people in every way. Two men, two women—many people don't see beyond couples—and it's hard to get people to recognize that we're talking about a much broader range of families.

CHRISLER: One of the things that having children as plaintiffs in the case also did was to take the high ground away from the right around the arguments that marriage equality is fundamentally bad for children. It gave voice to real children who were being harmed by the discrimination that was legally in place in Iowa.

TEPER: In Iowa and in Maine, actually seeing people with LGBT parents speaking out on behalf of ourselves

and our families was really powerful. In California, where our families were not as visible on that public scale within the campaign, we had a harder time—though many of our members and families did a lot of campaigning in their local communities.

In the 9- to 12-year-old age group, they created family portraits, a classic COLAGE activity. After sharing the portraits and hearing the stories of other youths, one of the boys just looked around the room and stood up and said, "I feel different." We asked him,

One child said, "I feel special. I feel powerful. I never knew there were others who had families like mine."

From Local to National

CATHCART: Invisibility hurts us. It hurts individual families but it also hurts us as a political movement. That's why I think organizing, like the work your organizations do, or like the Iowa Family Summit, which Lambda Legal organized and partnered on with One Iowa, Family Equality Council, COLAGE and other organizations, is key.

CHRISLER: There are always these individual moments of transformation when you get LGBT folks, parents in particular, together in a room and show them how much capacity they have to change the outcome of things when we're working for equality.

TEPER: All of the participants in COLAGE discussions at the Iowa Family Summit were new to COLAGE programming, or this kind of gathering. They had never really experienced being in a community space with other children of LGBT parents before.

"What do you mean?" He said, "I feel special. I feel powerful. I never knew there were others like me, who had families like mine. Hearing their stories makes me want to tell my story more, too." From testimony like this, we see how COLAGE helps children of LGBT parents become confident leaders, ready and eager to be heard on the issues that matter most to our families.

CATHCART: That's a great story. Iowa is a state where many people live in relatively small towns or cities. Building connections is really important to making the movement stronger in the state. It's so important to keep the work going in Iowa. We can't just check it off and say, "Oh, good, done, let's move on." And the dynamics are not so different in cities and towns across the country. We actually do know the answer to those insidious TV ads—it's visibility, honesty and building relationships. And that just takes determination, resources and time. **L**