

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

Oct 25, 2012 - Issue 491

GLAD's Diversity Work Inclusion By The Reverend Irene Monroe BC Editorial Board

I was lounging on the sofa watching a rerun episode of *The Bernie Mac Show* when the FedEx truck stopped in front of the house. The mail courier handed me a letter that stated the following:

"Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), New England's leading legal advocacy organization and a national leader on LGBT legal issues, is thrilled to invite you to be honored with the Spirit of Justice Award at the Boston Marriott Copley Place on Friday, October 26th."

Needless to say, I was stunned. I called Robbie Samuels, Senior Manager of Events and Donor Engagement at GLAD, expressing the organization made a grave mistake.

When I was finally able to calm down from the shock, I realized this event would also be a way for me to thank GLAD. So, I wrote back stating "I am honored to be this year's awardee. But I've not been in the struggle alone. The interconnectedness between my work and that of GLAD's is best depicted by the African proverb that states, 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am.' My social justice work in churches and in the streets comes to fruition because of GLAD's activism in the courts on behalf of us all."

My initial encounter with GLAD was contentious. My opinions, and those of LGBTQ communities of color nationwide, were expressed weekly in my column *The Religion Thang*, for the now defunct Boston-based LGBTQ paper *InNewsweekly*.

In February, 2005, I was reporting that tensions here in Massachusetts were growing and, once again, there was a color line. The issue was marriage equality for same-sex couples. With the state legislature about to rev up again to debate the issue, and with very little time for white queer religious and political machines to colorize what had been since its inception a white movement, voices from African-American queer organizations and communities of color were speaking up about our absence from the conversation.

To the surprise of white LGBTQ organizations, both the African-American LGBTQ and straight community had much to say about the white queer political machine's appropriation of the language of the black civil rights movement. Done without participation by people of color.

How the marriage debate should have been framed had not been given considerable concern. Communicating in a way that spoke truth to various LGBTQ communities of color and classes was not even considered.

The same-sex marriage debate had brought much consternation and polarization between black and white LGBTQ communities. Much of the finger pointing of the genesis of the ill-framed discussion was aimed at GLAD. Viewed by some as a lily-white organization, many people of color felt that GLAD replicated much of the same race and class divisions present in our federal judicial system.

While the marriage debate was strategically framed as an upper- to middle-class LGBTQ family issue, people of color felt that the "strategy won in court, but not in the court of public opinion, Dorchester African-American lesbian activist, Jacquie Bishop, told me.

In criticizing GLAD for its approach, Boston local African-American lesbian scholar, Dr. Marilyn Monteiro, wrote to me in an e-mail: "I've told GLAD this as well - asking me for money to assist them in 'their' struggle; expropriating (and therefore exploiting blacks in particular) the civil rights movement rhetoric; strategies in their interests while still excluding us from leadership positions other than token appointments. Please! It certainly is this way in Beantown, for sure. GLAD asked me to evaluate their web pages. I did. Do you think there have been any changes of the kind I suggested? Hell, no!"

In April of that same year, Lee Swislow, Executive Director of GLAD, came to the annual Bayard Rustin Community Breakfast. When GLAD

reached out to communities of color, inviting a dialogue for an inclusive re-framing of the marriage debate, the collective anger and frustration the LGBTQ communities of color collective felt toward the organization began to dissipate.

And in recognizing the need to look more deeply at diversity issues, this is GLAD's list of accomplishments send to me. In 2005, the GLAD Board asked the executive director to develop a diversity plan. There were very concrete actions associated with this plan, including:

Recruiting more people of color to the GLAD Board and staff

Looking at consultants and vendors that we use and reaching out to people of color and minority-owned businesses

Looking at the diversity reflected by who we honor through our Spirit of Justice Award

Reaching out to diverse communities through the topics and locations of our community events. Examples include:

- November, 2005 forum looking at the similarities and differences between the African-American struggle for civil rights and the LGBT struggle for civil rights
- October, 2006 community conversation with Mandy Carter
- April, 2008 forum on HIV/AIDS and the politics of invisibility
- October, 2010 forum on the future of religion and LGBT equality in America (with Reverend Irene Monroe and Bishop Gene Robinson)
- October, 2011 community conversation with Katherine Patrick

This year, GLAD received the Boston Bar Association Beacon Award for Diversity & Inclusion.

Because of GLAD's outreach to communities of color, more and more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are marrying.

Their efforts generated discussions among us and in our communities in the context of our families and lives that matters.

So an idea that was once thought of as an anathema to black queer identity, marriage, in our LGBTQ communities, is being celebrated and on the rise. And many of us are now proudly walking down the aisle to tie the knot.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. She is the Coordinator of the African-American Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at the Pacific School of Religion. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. She was recently named to MSNBC's list of [10 Black Women You Should Know](#). Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not'So'Everyday Moments](#). As an African-American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.



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