



Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC)

by Teresa Theophano

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The Gender Public Advocacy Coalition--better known as GenderPAC--was a national organization whose mission entailed ending discrimination on the basis of gender identification and stereotypes.

Founded by writer, transsexual activist, and executive director Riki Ann Wilchins in 1996, GenderPAC fulfilled a vital need for advocacy, both within the transgender community and outside it, on gender-related issues. Rather than focusing on single-identity-based advocacy, GenderPAC recognized and promoted understanding of the commonality among all types of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. It flourished for 15 years before disbanding in 2009.

Programs

Through its myriad programs--such as GenderYOUTH, Workplace Fairness, Violence Prevention, and Public Education initiatives--GenderPAC worked to dispel myths about gender stereotypes.

The GenderYOUTH program, for example, strove to empower young activists so that they could create GenderROOTS college campus chapters themselves, and go on to educate others about school violence.

Via its Workplace Fairness project, GenderPAC helped to educate elected officials about gender issues, change public attitudes, and support lawsuits that could expand legal rights for people who have suffered discrimination on the basis of gender.

In terms of violence prevention, GenderPAC collaborated with a Capitol Hill-based coalition of bipartisan organizations to further public education and media awareness about gender-based violent crimes. It emphasized to members of Congress the need for passage of the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (that is, the Hate Crimes Act).

Further, as part of its public education efforts, the organization held an annual National Conference on Gender in Washington, D. C. from 2008. The conference was a gathering of over 1,000 activists throughout the country and from numerous colleges, who worked together for three days on issues of gender policy, education, and strategy.

Accomplishments

GenderPAC's accomplishments include convincing several large corporations to add gender protection clauses to their Equal Employment Opportunity policies. It also secured commitments from several Congressmembers not to discriminate in their offices on the basis of gender.

In addition, the organization filed an amicus brief in the wrongful-death suit initiated by JoAnn Brandon, whose transgendered son Brandon was the victim of a hate-crime murder. It also helped to publicize the gender-based murders of Willie Houston, Fred Martinez, and Gwen Araujo, among others.

Criticism from Members of the Transgender Community

GenderPAC drew criticism from some members of the transgender community for its broad-based definition of oppression on the basis of gender. In early 2001, several transgender activists drafted an open "letter of concern" to GenderPAC, expressing their consternation over the organization's perceived mainstreaming and disconnection from the trans community. This alleged disconnection stemmed from GenderPAC's refusal to employ identity politics and its failure to focus on specifically transgender issues.

Wilchins publicly responded to these complaints, arguing that a broad spectrum of people--including, but not limited to those who identify as transgender--benefit from gender-rights activism.

For instance, GenderPAC helped to publicize the case of a butch lesbian who does not identify as transgender but who was harassed at her workplace, and eventually fired, for looking "too masculine." Another case for which GenderPAC advocated involved a biological woman who was terminated from her job for not wearing makeup or a feminine hairstyle.

Wilchins saw these cases as relevant to GenderPAC's mission, because she saw her group's efforts as a "post identity form of organizing" that emphasized true diversity, and focused on commonalities rather than differences.

Closing Down

In May 2009, GenderPAC's board and staff announced that the organization had achieved its goals. "Many of the early challenges we took on years ago--recognition of issues of gender in the workplace, on campus, and in the halls of Congress--are well launched and on their way."

Pointing out that whereas fifteen years previously, gender issues were barely on the national radar, they declared that by 2009 there was a core of vibrant and expanding organizations working on gender issues. "We take that as a sign of success. But also a sign that the original mission for which GenderPAC was formed, has been a success, and is behind us now. It is time for us to move on, to new challenges and the next edge in the growing struggle for gender rights."

With this farewell, GenderPAC declared victory, and passed on the baton to the new organizations. Wilchins and board co-chairs Cynthia Neff and Kevin Jones pledged to continue working for equal rights. "We will still be engaged in this work, but not as GenderPAC."

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About the Author

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