



Profile: Harry Knox, Program Director, Freedom to Marry

[8-16-04 by Regan Morris]

After being denied the opportunity to serve his church because he was gay, Harry Knox has become a crusader on behalf of gay rights, and the right to marry in particular. Knox talks with LawCrossing this week about his role as the program director of Freedom to Marry and the exciting changes he sees on the horizon.

Harry Knox works for an attorney, but his job is anything but traditional legal work. As program director of Freedom to Marry, a gay-rights advocacy group, Knox is known for his grassroots fundraising skills and for understanding how to press state and local governments to create gay-inclusive legislation.

Knox knew he wanted to be a lawyer or a minister. He was raised a Methodist and had always been active in the church. Ultimately, he decided his calling was the Lord, not the law. After earning a degree in political science from the University of Georgia, he received a Master of Divinity degree from Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, hoping for a career as a minister in the United Church of Christ.

But he was not ordained because he was gay.

That rejection made Knox an activist, and he vowed to fight for the rights of gays.

Knox believes attorney Evan Wolfson (to be profiled by LawCrossing next week) asked him to come work for Freedom to Marry because of his success in getting major companies in Georgia to provide domestic-partner benefits to same-sex couples. As executive director of Georgia Equality, Knox was instrumental in creating the Georgia Anti-Terrorism Act, a hate-crime law.

"The name is interesting. The law pre-dated September 11, 2001, and really got at the heart of what terrorism is about, and that is seeking to control large groups of people through terror," Knox told LawCrossing.

"And we were successful, within a couple of years, of getting Atlanta Gas Light Company, Bell South, Delta Airlines, Cingular Wireless, and other companies--the Coca-Cola company was the largest of them--to offer domestic-partner benefits.

Domestic-partner benefits became a standard in the state after that, he says, "because pretty much, as Coca-Cola and Bell South go, so goes the rest of the state of Georgia." Knox joined Freedom to Marry when it started in January, 2003 and along with Wolfson and other staff members, has been at the forefront of the battle for legal rights for same-sex couples.

"My route in [to the gay-rights movement] was as an advocate for civil-rights protection, but primarily from a legislative standpoint to begin with," he said. "And I think that's why Evan wanted me to come and work here, because I had a background in having done that and done it at the state level."

While his career has been about litigation, Freedom to Marry is not a litigation group. "Our role organizationally is to be a catalyst for the Freedom to Marry movement around the country and to help to resource all of the groups and individuals that are working on the issue," he said.

Knox's job involves helping political activists and litigation groups to communicate, train their staff to educate their communities, and connect people in the movement from different states. He says his day-to-day job includes "things as mundane as basic fundraising, non-profit organizational

management--up to the more sublime things like strategic planning around the marriage issue."

He studies cases in various states and "things that can be treated as case studies that can be replicated around the country in various ways" to help gay partners receive equal rights under the law. Same-sex couples that live together like married couples are not granted the same legal rights as heterosexual couples on things as small as car insurance discounts for married couples to rights to receive social security or inheritance after a same-sex partner dies.

Knox says each day of his job is different because the organization has been in the national spotlight, and groups across the country look to Freedom to Marry for leadership.

"We have had a heck of a ride in a little less than two years," he said. "Evan's been at this for more than 20 years. Long before any of the rest of us got on board, he was a voice in the wilderness on this issue. So in a very real sense all of the rest of us are Johnny-Come-Latelys to this."

Knox works with litigation groups like the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Legal and Gay and Lesbian Advocates, Defenders in New England, and others.

"It's a lot of fun because the work is very dynamic, never the same from one day to the next, and always interesting," he said. "And our work is multifaceted. Our colleagues are taking different and state-appropriate direc-



tions in trying to achieve marriage equality.” Knox says the Freedom to Marry movement has different strategies in each state, depending on how the population feels about gay marriage.

“Some of the states are taking solely legislative tacks and others are taking litigation strategies and others are doing a combination of the two,” he said. “And in a lot of the other places where we’re not likely to be successful in that particular state in the very near future, people are doing full-scale public relations campaigns.”

He says education is crucial in every state, because many people aren’t familiar with the gay and lesbian communities in their neighborhoods and of how discrimination impacts gays. The variety of strategies--legislation, public relations, fundraising, and national planning--drives Knox.

“It really keeps things diverse and dynamic and fun around here,” he said.

Although he is still active in the Church, Knox no longer plans to become a minister - particularly because he has had to switch denominations each time he moves to whichever local church is gay-friendly. The church that denied his ordination in the 1980s later ordained three lesbians, and Knox feels like he helped pave the way for those women and other members of the gay and lesbian community. He says of all his achievements, he is proudest of receiving the Cordle Award for the promotion of God’s diversity, given to him by the members of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Atlanta.