Congressman John Lewis on LGBT equality, social justice

BY JEN COLLETTA

When President Barack Obama linked Selma, Stonewall and Stonewall in his second inaugural address, it was a connection that hit home for Congressman John Lewis.

For more than six decades, Lewis has been on the front lines of the fight for social justice—whether it’s racial equality, the women’s movement or LGBT rights. Lewis began his work in the civil rights movement in the 1950s, and quickly became a national leader. He was the youngest of the “Big Six”—a national group of movement leaders, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who organized the 1963 March on Washington—and an original Freedom Rider. Lewis led hundreds of civil-rights marchers into Selma, Alabama, in 1965, in a demonstration that would come to be known as “Bloody Sunday,” as protesters were beaten and tear-gassed by police. Lewis still bears the scars of a skull fracture suffered that day.

Lewis parlayed his protests into politics, rising from a City Council member in Atlanta to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, a role he has held for more than 30 years. During that time, Lewis has been a constant ally to and advocate for LGBT causes.

Philadelphia Gay News sat down with the Congressman to explore his view of the evolution of American equality.

Philadelphia Gay News: You led a congressional sit-in following last summer’s shooting at an LGBT nightclub in Orlando. What did that accomplish, and do you think something like that would be effective again, given the events in Las Vegas?

John Lewis: Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “The time is always right to protest for what is right.” We have had too much gun violence, lost too many people. After Orlando, and after the sit-in on the House floor, we thought we’d see some action on the part of the House and the Senate, but we have not seen any action. We have not moved. Even now, with what happened in Las Vegas, people are saying, “It’s too early to do something.”

We have to do something. As I said on the steps of the Capitol today, we lost too many mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers, too many of our friends. The time is right for action. We will be engaged in some form of non-violent protest at the Capitol or in some building because we cannot wait. We cannot see more and more people being murdered at a concert, a dance hall, in a school, in a church, a mosque, a temple. We are determined to put control of the proliferation of gun violence on the Congressional agenda. The American people are demanding it. They want us to act, to do something. People say, “We have to wait, we have to be patient.” Before the March on Washington, they told us to wait, to be patient. We cannot wait. We cannot be patient. We want freedom, and we want it now. We want gun control now.

PGN: Switching gears, you have degrees in religious studies. What do you think can be done to close the chasm between the LGBT community and some religious communities?

JL: I think it’s important for members of religious communities to understand and know that members of the gay community are part of the human family. I grew up in a Baptist Church. I attended churches of all kinds in Atlanta, in Nashville. People shouldn’t discriminate against someone who is gay or put someone down. Many of the members in our churches, in our religious institutions, are gay. The church is supposed to preach the gospel of love, the gospel of peace, the gospel of sisterhood and brotherhood, that we are one family—that we all live in the same house, not just an American house but a world house. As Dr. King said, “Learn to live together as brothers as sisters. If not, we’ll perish as fools.”

The church needs to learn and understand that there is not any room in our society—or any society—to discriminate against someone because of sexual orientation.

PGN: You’ve been fighting for civil rights, particularly racial justice, for decades. What are your thoughts on the current state of race relations in this country, compared to 60 years ago when you started this work? What’s changed and what hasn’t?

JL: We’ve come a distance and made a lot of progress. When I was growing up and getting involved in the movement, you would see signs: “White men” and “Colored men,” “White women” and “Colored women.” In 1961, the year President Obama was born, blacks and whites couldn’t be seated together on a bus leaving Washington, D.C., and traveling through the South. We were arrested, we were beaten, we were jailed. Today, the signs are gone and the only places we see those signs are in a book, on a video, or in a museum. So we have come a distance. We made progress. People who say we haven’t, I feel like saying to them, “Come walk in my shoes.” People can register to vote now where during the 1950s and ’60s they were beaten, arrested, jailed. Some people were murdered when they attempted to register to vote or encouraged others to register. There are folks who are trying to make it harder, to undo the progress we’ve made. What happened in [Charlottesville] Virginia a few weeks ago traumatized this country more than anything in recent years. The scars, the stains of racism and bigotry are still deeply embedded in American society. It’s a constant struggle for us to redefine the soul of America during the movement, we called it “a beloved community.” I believe we will get there. I think many members of the gay community today are playing a major role in helping us get there, along with women’s groups, young people, children. I believe our finality will be the young—middle school, elementary school, high school, college. They will help us get there, to lay down the burden of sexism, bigotry, hate, anti-Semitism. We will get there. I’m very optimistic.

PGN: What do you say to those who don’t share that optimism, in light of the current administration?

JL: I say over and over to people—young people and not so young—that in spite of everything that has happened, you must be hopeful. You must be optimistic. If you lose hope and you lose optimism, it’s like you don’t exist, like you are dead. You cannot afford to lose it. Right after the election, people would come up to me and say, “Congressman, I’m so down, so down.” They’d walk up and say, “I need a hug.” I said, “I need a hug too,” and we all hugged. But we have to get up—keep picking up and putting down and keep saying, “I’m going to keep the faith, keep moving, keep hoping and keep building that sense of community for the common good.”

Jen Colletta is the editor of Philadelphia Gay News.

Justice Dept. steps in trans murder case

In an unusual move that Attorney General Jeff Sessions initiated, the Justice Department has dispatched an experienced federal hate-crimes lawyer to Iowa to help prosecute a man charged with murdering a transgender high school student last year, according to The New York Times.

Keadie Johnson (a 16-year-old student in Burlington, Iowa) was fatally shot in March 2016. Christopher Perrin, a Justice Department lawyer, will serve as a county prosecutor in the case, according to court documents.

However, some have viewed this development with skepticism. Lambda Legal Director of Strategy Sharon McGowan said, “Of course it is important and right that the Department of Justice assist in bringing to justice the murderer of Keadie/Kandise Johnson, one of the far too many transgender people, and especially transgender people of color, targeted in the ongoing lethal epidemic of hate violence. But it is the height of cynicism for Attorney General Jeff Sessions to use this—frankly rare—instance of civil rights enforcement under his tenure to deflect from the current department’s sustained opposition to its historic mission.”


Madigan files anti-bias brief

Attorney General Lisa Madigan, along with 17 other attorneys general, filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court arguing that employment discrimination that is based on sexual orientation violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

The case, Evans v. Georgia Regional Hospital, involves Jameka Evans, a security guard at a Savannah hospital who was harassed at work and forced out of her job because she is a lesbian.

Joining Madigan in filing the brief were the attorneys general from California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, Vermont, Washington and the District of Columbia.