



# LGBTs taking nothing for granted

By LAURA WASHINGTON February 15, 2014 10:24PM

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History is a curious thing. We want to honor our history, but to preserve it, we must make it stick. Illinois' gay, lesbian bisexual and transgender community celebrated history Feb. 8 at the annual Equality Illinois gala.

About 1,400 LGBTs and supporters packed the Hilton and Towers ballroom, partying into the night to venerate the historic passage of the religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act. Signed into law Nov. 20, the measure legalized same-sex marriage.

It was a record turnout for Equality Illinois, the state's largest civil rights organization. The theme: Let's celebrate our victories, then make sure they stick.

The black-tie affair kicked off with the usual parade of politicians, strutting across the stage in support of LGBT causes — 92 electeds, candidates, judges and other officials, grabbing for the limelight — and votes.

The usual big foots were there: Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

Democrats still dominate the ranks of LGBT supporters, but the GOP played a pivotal role in the marriage fight. U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk, Republican of Illinois, was brought onstage to receive a "Freedom Award," cited for his "courage" in "support (of) LGBT rights in the face of difficult political headwinds."

Another honoree was the former James Pritzker, who chaired the fundraiser. Last August, Pritzker stunned Chicago's high society when he changed his name to Jennifer Natalya Pritzker. Pritzker is the first transgender person to chair Equality Illinois' gala.

The billionaire Pritzker family member is also a retired U.S. Army colonel, founder of the Pritzker Military Museum and a prominent philanthropist. Wearing an elegant black dress and single string of pearls, Jennifer Pritzker came to the stage for a champagne toast to marriage.

It was fitting. “Our community always needs more role models, more heroes who are open about their identity and who are fighting for what they believe in, Equality Illinois CEO Bernard Cherkasov told me as the party kicked off. “And Col. Pritzker is one such role model.”

Many were still incredulous that same-sex marriage is here. “Who would have thought in our lifetime that we would see marriage equality?” asked 44th Ward Ald. Tom Tunney, Chicago’s first openly gay alderman.

You didn’t expect this so soon?

“No. Nor did I would say the vast majority of people in this room.”

LGBT couples are signing up for bridal registries, hiring bands and planning honeymoons. As they luxuriate in victory, they are also steeling for the work ahead. Conservative Republicans are pushing to repeal the law. Transgenders still face discrimination in the workplace. Hate crimes and bullying must be addressed. Funding for AIDS treatment and prevention still falls short.

About those “political headwinds.”

State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz gave a shout-out to key players who helped put marriage over the top. Nine of the legislators who voted “yes” face challenges in the March 18 primary.

“Many of my colleagues who are here tonight . . . took enormous political risk when they voted for this law,” exhorted Feigenholtz, a North Side lawmaker. “They need to know that we’re going to be standing with them shoulder to shoulder.”

The Equality Illinois Political Action Committee is backing them with support and resources. One more way to make it stick.

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