

## Gay members seek visibility at GOP convention

Tracie Mauriello | August 27, 2012

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TAMPA, Fla. -- Rich Weissmann has been a Republican for many years but had never been to a political convention. That changed when he arrived in Tampa this week.

"Quite frankly, it did not occur to me as a gay person to attend a Republican convention, and today it does," said Mr. Weissman, 58, of Portland, Ore. "Today, I feel it's an important thing to do. The Republican Party has become significantly more open, significantly more accepting."

On Sunday, he attended a convention welcome party sponsored by the Log Cabin Republicans, a group that advocates equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Americans.

Log Cabin Republicans sponsored the hors d'oeuvres reception. Gay rights groups are hosting other events this week to coincide with the Republican National Convention in Tampa, too. There's a brunch to honor gay delegates, an "Out to Win" party to support gay candidates in down-ticket races, and GOProud's "Homocon," which organizers promise will be a party, not "one of those boring GOP cocktail receptions."

This isn't your father's Republican convention.

It has been a slow transformation for the party as older, more socially conservative stalwarts are being replaced by younger ones who grew up in a society more accepting of homosexuality, where they watched gay characters emerge on TV sitcoms and saw Facebook friends post unabashed status messages declaring their love for someone of the same gender.

"The world is changing," said Sarah Longwell, a member of the leadership committee of Young Conservatives for the Freedom to Marry. "The majority of young conservatives under the age of 40 believe in marriage equality, and if their party wants to stay relevant -- wants to continue to grow and acquire new members -- it's going to find itself needing to rethink its position on gay marriage pretty soon."

Ms. Longwell also is a member of the national board of directors for Log Cabin Republicans.

"A lot of people think it's an oxymoron, but Log Cabin Republicans think it's important to be at the table and persuade the party we belong to get on the right side of history," she said in a recent telephone interview. "A big part of participating in the convention is being at the convention and working with Republicans on the next frontier: marriage equality."

Polls show a clear generational divide within the Republican Party when it comes to gay rights issues, and gatherings in Tampa this weekend seemed to bear that out.

Just as the Log Cabin Republicans party was starting, another GOP event was winding down a few miles away at the historic Tampa Theater. There, nearly 2,000 Republicans -- most appearing to be over 50 -- applauded socially conservative religious leaders and politicians who spoke against gay marriage during a rally sponsored by the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

They cheered when Texas Senate candidate Ted Cruz said marriage should be between one man and one woman, and they clapped when coalition founder Ralph Reed slammed President Barack Obama for supporting gay marriage.

Nine miles away, Log Cabin Republican leaders were preparing to welcome conservative gays and lesbians at the Rusty Pelican, an upscale restaurant with beautiful views of Old Tampa Bay.

Chris Koomer, 30, of Tampa was among the guests. He said the Republican Party is going to have to change as it ages.

Party leaders "are going to have to recognize that the younger generation is socially liberal," he said. "The party is going to have to evolve as gays become more of a force in the party."

Gay Republicans have a bigger presence at the convention than ever.

"For the longest time they've been on the outside looking in, and it's within the past six or seven years that more and more Republican party officials are paying attention to them, listening to them and inviting them to be part of an inclusive Republican coalition," said Dave Lampo of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. "Their visibility has grown."

But some social conservatives say they aren't welcome.

"They have no business being there. Our message is to them is that your home is in the Democratic Party," said Bryan Fischer, director of issue analysis for the Tupelo, Miss.-based American Family Association, a conservative radio host and a leading anti-gay figure in the GOP.

"These groups are actively working to undermine and subvert the Republican party platform and the principles of the Republican Party," Mr. Fischer said in a telephone interview. "They are undermining the moral foundations of the Republican Party."

It's no matter to him that Log Cabin Republicans support nearly every other party platform from tax policy to gun rights.

"There is no place for the homosexual agenda," he said. "The Republican platform is very clean on the issues of marriage and family and parenting, and these are people that are actively working against the principles of the party."

Ms. Longwell, who grew up in conservative Perry County, Pa., said marriage equality is consistent with party ideology calling for limited government and the formation of stable families.

"Too many Republicans are misunderstanding what being a conservative is all about. It's about keeping the government out of our lives to the greatest extent possible," said Ms. Longwell, who recently became engaged to her longtime girlfriend in Washington, D.C., where gay marriage is legal.

Mr. Fischer said young Republicans like Ms. Longwell misunderstand the premise.

"The reason they are for gay marriage is that it is an issue of liberty for people to have the freedom to do what they want ... but we oppose gay marriage because it threatens liberty," he said.

He offered two examples of businesses whose freedoms were trumped by what he calls the gay agenda. First, he said several mayors are trying to keep Chick-fil-A restaurants out of their cities because the company's devout Christian owners oppose gay marriage. In another example, he said, the New Mexico Civil Rights Commission fined Christian photographer Elaine Huguenin for refusing to photograph a lesbian couple's commitment ceremony.

"The gay agenda is a threat to religious liberty. It is a danger to the liberty that the party stands for ... and it's tyranny that's being launched against businesses," Mr. Fischer said.

He said younger members of his party don't see that "because they are young and they are immature and they are unaware of the severe dangers to liberty that is posed by the homosexual agenda."

Mr. Lampo said those views don't reflect the views of most rank-and-file Republicans.

"I think even most people on the religious right, including opponents of same-sex marriage, are appalled by him," Mr. Lampo said. "The cultural change that is leading to support for same-sex marriage has already taken place. Bryan Fisher and people like that are stuck in the culture of the 1950s. They live in an Ozzie and Harriet world where every family was a two-parent family, gay people didn't exist, hopefully there were no African-Americans who lived on their block, and foreigners were something you saw when you went across the seas."

In separate interviews, several attendees at Sunday's party said it's easier to be gay in a Republican crowd than to be Republican in a gay crowd.

"I'm 68 and I've never had any discrimination or anything because I'm gay, but -- inside the gay community and outside the gay community -- people find out I'm a Republican and it can be trouble," said Guy Castagliola of Hillsborough County, Fla. "Some say, 'Do you hate yourself?' I say, 'I happen to be for lower taxes and less government spending. Does that mean I hate myself?' "

Said Ms. Longwell: "You've got to be really, really serious about your conservatism to be a gay Republican. You've got to be willing to take heat from both sides. Gay people think you're a traitor, and Republicans -- at least some portion of them -- are opposed to your basic civil rights," she said. "It can be a lonely place."

But, she says, she won't defect from the party just because of one issue, especially when she's optimistic about being able to change the minds of more socially conservative party mates.

"It's important that the conversation happens from one Republican to another because you need to be able to say, 'Look, I agree with you on most things but I disagree with you on this and let me tell you why,' " she said. "We can work with them and change their opinion over time."

Gay Republicans can't afford to wait, and neither can the party as a whole, said R. Clarke Cooper, executive director of Log Cabin Republicans.

"If one is looking at it from a principled standpoint of equality, the need for the Republican Party to be inclusive that's great, but there's also the pragmatic view that if you want to maintain majorities and win elections you have to be inclusive," he said.

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