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Op-ed: The LGBT Movement After Marriage

By Rebecca Isaacs

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When I first got involved in the movement to advance the rights of LGBT people, I joined a cohort of those who worked hard to create the extraordinary moment we are

living in now. It feels great to have reached this milestone alongside many of my colleagues from back then and with the many young activists who have joined our ranks in the last 30 years.

It feels great, but it doesn't feel like a finish line.

As we rack up marriage win after marriage win, I have lost count of the number of times I've been asked by well meaning acquaintances, "Isn't it almost over? Isn't it just a matter of time?"

I understand why some might feel that the LGBT movement is nearing its finish line. Marriage is a big, exciting issue, and we are winning in places we never imagined winning. But in my work as executive director of the Equality Federation, I've had the opportunity to form strategic partnerships with local groups working on the ground in nearly every state. And in every state, even the ones where we have won marriage, grassroots leaders are still working, and their vision reminds me very much of the one we had years ago.

Marriage means a lot, but our movement is not finished. It's time for us to go back to the roots of our movement toward our goal of lived equality.

Marriage equality will not keep LGBT young people in their homes and loved by their families. It will not keep them in school and out of the criminal justice system. It will not ensure transgender people access to accurate identity documents or critical healthcare services. It will not make our streets and our communities safe and free from violence. It will not make our military, our prisons, our immigration system, or our healthcare inclusive and just. It will not erase the vulnerability our community feels as we age in a world without an adequate safety net.

Lived equality is about freedom. Freedom from bigotry, freedom to be who we are and live without facing nearly insurmountable obstacles, freedom to love and be loved.

This freedom cannot be measured only in policies and laws; it must also be measured in the lived experience of real people.

Our movement is about more than equal rights. It's about people's lives.

From cradle to grave, how do LGBT people experience the world? Where are we embraced for all of who we are? Where do we face rejection? In what places and what circumstances do we encounter unreasonable challenges and barriers to living happy, healthy and thriving lives? What stands between us and true freedom?

At the Equality Federation, our approach reflects who we are. As the strategic partner to state-based LGBT advocacy organizations, we believe in continuing to build a strong movement for equality, both legal and lived, that is rooted in all of the communities we call home.

So what's next?

Over the last year, we've been working closely with state organizations that are beyond the marriage milestone — and with state organizations that have not yet won marriage but are planning for it. We've been collaborating with these leaders and thinking about our community: the opportunities we're denied, the violence we face, the obstacles we're forced to tear down.

Together, we're sketching out what post-marriage work, what lived equality, what real freedom looks like.

In Maine, it means not only passing laws to increase transgender people's access to healthcare but also building the leadership of young transgender community members. In Minnesota it means not only passing a law to protect young people from bullying but also partnering with racial and education justice groups to make sure that implementing this law does not increase school pushout. In North Carolina, where marriage is still banned, it means working to change hearts and minds about marriage while building a broad, diverse coalition to end multiple oppressions — from voter suppression to LGBT discrimination.

In each state, the path ahead looks different. But in every case, moving forward means reaching across barriers, across movements, across generations, across cultures, and across regions in an effort to create unprecedented collaboration, cooperation, and coordination.

Moving forward means developing a group of leaders who can work across issues and across the diversity and complexity of our community, who can work at the intersections of the oppression that separates us from the freedom we so long to win.

Moving forward means committing ourselves to creating the the world that we want to live in.

REBECCA ISAACS is executive director of Equality Federation, the strategic partner and movement builder to state-based organizations advancing equality in the communities we call home.

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