

## Task Masters

D.C.'s own Rea Carey and Darlene Nipper ready The Task Force for a new Beginning

*Interview by Will O'Bryan*

*Photography by Todd Franson*

*Published on January 29, 2009*



Outside, it's a cold and sunny January afternoon. Inside the sixth-floor offices of the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, the entryway is piled high with dozens of boxes representing an organization on the move -- to Denver, specifically. The boxes contain those papers and pieces of the Task Force being shipped out to the organization's Creating Change conference of grassroots activism, now through Feb. 1, in Executive Director Rea Carey's hometown.

After 20 years in D.C., Carey, who agreed to transition from acting to permanent director during the summer, following the departure of former boss Matt Foreman, is more Washingtonian than Denver-ite. Though not quite so much as her new deputy executive director, Darlene Nipper, a born-and-raised Washingtonian, best known to D.C.'s GLBT community for taking over as the director of former Mayor Anthony Williams' Office of GLBT Affairs after the horrific March 2005 stabbing death of Wanda Alston, the first to head that office on a permanent basis.

Together the pair presents a sort of radiance, as bright as the rays beaming in through the windows of their Thomas Circle perch. With Carey comes the veteran activist who headed the D.C.-based National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) before coming to the Task Force. With Nipper comes a champion of substance-abuse issues and a minister who has explored spirituality

in India. There's no arguing this is not a dynamic duo.

As the District welcomes a new administration to the White House, the Task Force finds itself headed by two women whose ties are undeniably D.C., a switch for the Task Force, with other offices in Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Cambridge, Mass. But what better time? There's a new president pledging plenty for the GLBT community. Right after Creating Change, it's time for the organization's D.C. Leadership Awards, and then it's the Winter Party Festival in Miami, Feb. 25 to March 2.

With so much moving and shaking to get done, it's a wonder that Carey and Nipper found an hour to sit with *Metro Weekly*. But if anyone is happy to make time for grassroots media, it's the Task Force.

**METRO WEEKLY:** *Darlene, I need to check in with you first. I don't know everything you've done since stepping down as the director of the mayor's Office of GLBT Affairs. Have you been back to India?*

**DARLENE NIPPER:** Don't talk about India. This is the time of year that I would go to India. There's a spiritual retreat at the beginning of February. I won't be doing that this year, because I'll be having too much fun at Creating Change.

**REA CAREY:** [*Laughs.*] The spiritual retreat that is Creating Change.

**NIPPER:** Well, what happened was Mayor [Adrian] Fenty moved me from the post as [GLBT] liaison to work in the Department of Health. So I worked in the DOH for quite a bit of time as sort of a change-management person. I spent most of my time in APRA (Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration).

Then, for a very short stint in the beginning of '08, I decided it was time for me to leave the government. I took a job -- a spiritual job -- as executive director of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. With my meditation practice and my interest in Buddhism, I thought I'd give something to them, help them to set up the organization, grow them a little bit. I was there for maybe six or seven months, when this one here called me up to have a coffee.

**CAREY:** Just coffee! Innocent coffee.

**NIPPER:** And now I'm here. I actually had said to Rea at the Task Force's D.C. Leadership Awards, "Rea, if you ever need anything, seriously, you must be swamped."

**CAREY:** I took you seriously. People always say, "Oh, anything that we can do." People say that a lot to the Task Force and we tend to take them up on it because we consider the Task Force a community of people who are really moving the work forward.

[*To Nipper*] Something struck me about the way that you said that, as well as your expertise in so many different arenas in which you've worked.

We were in the middle of the search for my old role, deputy executive director, and one of our staff members said, "Wouldn't it be amazing if we could get Darlene Nipper?" And I said, "I'll call her." We had coffee and here she is.

**MW:** *How long have you two known each other?*



**Darlene Nipper**

**NIPPER:** That's a good question. Many years.

**CAREY:** A long time. Our stars have sort of circled around each other. I used to be the executive director of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition and I think that's probably the first way we met. We've had friends in common, colleagues in common. But this is the first time we're actually getting to work together.

**MW:** *You weren't always bumping into each other at fundraisers, parties?*

**NIPPER:** I won't say we've *never* seen each other at parties, but less so. Mostly through work. I actually don't party much, so that could be part of it. [*Laughs.*]

**CAREY:** [*Laughs.*] And I don't get out at all. What's true of D.C. is that once you stick around for more than four years -- born here or not -- particularly in the GLBT movement, you get to know a lot of people. But this is the first time that we've really gotten to spend time together, to work together.

**MW:** *How does the Carey-Nipper Show compare to the Foreman-Carey Show? What are the differences in rapport or style?*

**CAREY:** Working with Matt was really a partnership in the development of our contribution to moving the Task Force forward, with policy change and with activism for our community. It feels that way. Darlene just came in October [and] it feels very much like a partnership. I remember specifically during our coffee and other conversations, saying it feels like a next phase or next era of our movement.

**MW:** *Because of the election?*

**CAREY:** Part of it is an "Obama effect," if you will, which is that what we saw in this past year, for a variety of reasons, is more people became politically engaged. Young people became politically engaged. People who were politically disenfranchised over the years -- specifically people of color -- became more engaged.

For 35 years, Task Force values have been about activism and political engagement, with particular attention to LGBT people who are not always paid attention to, or engaged, or given power. So it felt like this year there was a shift in the country. Part and parcel of which is how the LGBT community can stay engaged and move forward. We certainly saw that in the elections and in the taking to the streets following Prop. 8 and Amendment 2, and Arizona and Arkansas. It just feels like this different time. And just knowing of Darlene's work in the private sector, in the government sector, in the nonprofit sector, it just felt like, "This is going to be a good team."

**MW:** *After working in city government, Darlene, how do you feel about the opportunity to flex your activist muscles?*

**NIPPER:** I would definitely say that city bureaucracy is... unique. [*Laughs.*] This is more inline with my professional experience. This feels more like a natural fit for me.

I think of the LGBT movement as an especially white movement, which I've had a lot of experience in. All of my work has been going into major movements, like the mental-health movement, which are predominantly run and led by the majority culture, in terms of demographics. And [I] help those organizations to move to a place of fully expressing their intent and their value of being inclusive of all kinds of people. The beauty of the Task Force is that that's always been who they are. The beauty of our timing is that this is a time when I can be at an organization like the Task Force and actually feel like I have what it takes to bring the full expression of who I am, and to have that have some real value at the Task Force.

And the other way around: The Task Force's values and its history have a real impact on who I am.

**MW:** *In conversations I've had with H. Alexander Robinson at the National Black Justice Coalition, he's pointed out that national GLBT leadership is largely white. What does it mean for the Task Force to have a deputy executive director of color?*

**NIPPER:** If there is a group that has looked at our issues across various expressions of identity -- whether it's trans identity, or racial identity or ethnicity, or cultural in other ways -- the Task Force is the organization that has had that history. This is an organization that has always been an organization that has brought together people who are dealing with multiple vulnerabilities, and has worked with those groups to move the whole movement forward, in terms of equality. I feel good about that. What I bring is a visual -- a very open, direct, clear expression of that.

Just like when people say, "So much has changed. Does it really matter whether Obama is president?" Well, yes. It matters partly because we are able to see ourselves in that person. When you see the president, you know that it has never happened before. It's a vision of hope. It's "Hey, this is something any of us can do." And I think it's important for the folks that the Task Force has worked with for a long time, because there's a lot of racial justice that's been done in this organization. It's important for all those young activists to see that the leadership of this organization reflects something that resonates with them. In some ways, that's what I bring to this organization.



**Rea Carey**

**MW:** *Issues around race were pricked within the GLBT community in the wake of Proposition 8. There was a lot of friction amid largely debunked charges that African-American voters were to blame, with the counterpoint that the accusations coming from white gays were tinged with racism.*

**CAREY:** Our movement exists in a broader society that has -- it's an understatement to say -- an extraordinary experience with race. We struggle with how we as a country make progress, given racial differences and the history of race in this country.

The same is true for the LGBT movement. There are a variety of reasons that are systemic about why it is that our movement has not been able to support and sustain many of the people of color who have been, or could be, in leadership.

Having worked in the youth movement myself, knowing how critically important it is for young people to say, "I could have that job someday," and to see themselves reflected in many ways, it is part and parcel of the values of the Task Force. But it's not just the values, it's what we do reports on, it's who we partner with, it affects the choices that we make as an organization so that as we move forward it's why we work on racial and economic justice.

It's why, with the incoming administration, we have been insistent in talking about the economy and health care in a larger sense as LGBT issues, which has been a fascinating experience, because we've gotten a lot of pushback. When we've talked about what's coming up in the next administration and we say, "Well, let's talk about the economy and how LGBT people are losing their jobs, and the protections that aren't in place," that's an economic issue. The pushback is,

"Why are you talking about the economy? What about 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'?"

Absolutely we're working on "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." But let's talk about how people are losing their health care when their partners have lost jobs.

**MW:** *Especially at a time of tighter donation dollars, break it down for "Jane or Joe Everygay" how Task Force values might differ from Human Rights Campaign values. The question of how these two primary organizations differ seems ever-present.*

**CAREY:** We look at it a little differently: What is the difference between the Task Force and People for the American Way? What is the difference between the Task Force and organizations that are working on racial justice? What is the difference between the Task Force and organizations that are working on community organizing?

The way that we view our sandbox, if you will, is we do our work.

One of our priorities moving forward is to do even more partnerships with non-LGBT organizations who care deeply about the issues affecting LGBT people, in addition to partnering with the LGBT organizations who are our colleagues. So we look at it a little bit differently. We believe in our mission to build the political power of the LGBT community from the ground up.

That says a lot about our values. We believe that we have and that we can express political power. We need to build more of it to accomplish the changes that we seek. And we're explicitly talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. There's so much that is in just our mission statement, in that we believe in the power of grassroots.

**NIPPER:** The power of community.

**CAREY:** The power of community. Change happens in communities. It's people talking with each other. That's why we do so much organizing around the country. Even when we do federal work, it is with an eye toward how it can concretely benefit the lives of LGBT people.

**MW:** *Speaking of the grassroots, is that where most of the funding comes from? How is the poor economy affecting the Task Force?*

**CAREY:** We do get individual donor money. We receive a lot of foundation funding as well.

**NIPPER:** We're in the middle of learning about what's happening right now, like everybody else. One of the things that is clear is that we need to be very careful and conscientious about our spending.

These foundations and so forth are just feeling the hit. There's probably a little bit of a lag before we can see clearly. We're hearing people talking about the fact that they've felt the hit. What we need to do is be efficient and good stewards of the funds that we get and to make sure that we are running programs and doing the work as efficiently and as effectively as possible. We're in the middle of finding out how it's really going to affect us. I think we're not the only ones at that place.

**CAREY:** Really starting last spring, everyone started asking what was going on. The good thing about our planning is that we have always been a very conservative organization with every dollar that's given us in terms of choices that we make. We do take very seriously the stewardship of our donors' dollars and our foundation dollars. And we've already taken steps. Painfully, there are a few positions we've held back filling because we don't want to have to be in the position of bringing someone on and then having to cut them. So we've been extremely conservative.

Oddly enough -- our fiscal year begins in July -- the first quarter was great in major donors, direct mail, events, etc. Now, we -- like other organizations -- are starting to get more information from what would be our second fiscal quarter, the last part of the year, and it's mixed. Here's what's strange: On the one hand, individual donors who have been loyal to us forever are continuing to give. We've been very blessed by our significant [individual] donors. In personal calls that I made to them, they said, "We love the Task Force's work. Yes, it's a stretch this year, but we're going to give." That's great. In other areas, we're seeing it's a struggle for some people, like with our direct mail. We're still getting the numbers from that, but we're being very cautious.

But we have more registrants for Creating Change right now than we did this time last year. On the one hand, people are being conservative with their own money, their own choices to give. On the other, people are engaged. They see the Task Force is an organization with no fluff, that we do the work. We focus on the things that make a difference in people's lives and we go for it.

**MW:** *Darlene, will this be your first Creating Change?*

**NIPPER:** I was actually supposed to go in 2004, but that's when I got cancer and was not able to attend. This will be my first. I'm thrilled. I have a huge agenda.

**MW:** *And how are numbers for the Winter Party Festival?*

**NIPPER:** Oddly ahead. Way ahead.

**CAREY:** The numbers for our Winter Party, an event we've turned into a cultural festival and celebration -- it's now more than the beach party and the pool party, although those are still part of it -- we are *far* ahead of where we were at this time last year.

It's an interesting time because goodness knows the Task Force, over our 35 years, has had its ups and downs. So have many organizations. This is an interesting time because, not only are the organizations having a hard time, the donors are having a hard time, the foundations are having a hard time. For those community institutions who take government funds -- we're not one of them -- for elders or youth or HIV, it's hard times there, too.

What is good is that many organizations are talking to each other, asking, "How are you being creative around this?" "How can we collaborate more?" Necessity will breed a lot of creativity in how we as a movement accomplish our pursuit of equality.

**MW:** *Then, amid the recession, you get possibly the most gay-friendly federal government to work with. Best of times, worst of times?*

**CAREY:** This incoming president has a lot on his plate to do with this economy, and everyone in the country is being affected by it. Our point is: Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are affected by the economy as well. When looking at how to attend to some of the most vulnerable people in our country, who are homeless or otherwise don't have food or shelter, we are part of that as well. What we don't want to have happen is to not be in the conversation or at the tables that are talking about tax policy.

**NIPPER:** In some ways, we've been almost "ghettoized" into an LGBT group, so it's different than what other people are experiencing. This is a different way of looking at it. It's not that we're different than other people. We have particular vulnerabilities, but our issues need to be addressed in the context of all the issues that anyone is facing right now. So tax policy becomes critically important. It may present a unique vulnerability for an LGBT person.

**MW:** *What sort of communication have you had with the Obama transition team? What sort of rapport?*

**NIPPER:** We did a "new administration policy-recommendation book" [called *A New Beginning*] that's highlighted a number of recommendations from, I think, 20 organizations. We led this coalition and the result was this book of policy recommendations, which we could share directly with the administration - various policies that would affect the lives of LGBT people in Health and Human Services or other agencies, even agriculture.

**CAREY:** This transition team feels quite different from any transition team that I've had interaction with before, in transparency and the openness to our suggestions. We said, "We have worked with this coalition, we have this document. We have 80 policies that will concretely improve the

lives of LGBT people. We're going to give this to you." And they said, "Great. We're going to put these up on our Web site."

It has been a very different experience, working with this administration. We have been invited to conversations about tax policy, about immigration.

Now, will this next president disappoint us at some point? Absolutely. Has he already with the Warren selection? Absolutely. But this is a team of people, so far, that has been very responsive to our community and we certainly intend to continue to hold them accountable.

**MW:** *With so much focus on Washington now, do you marshal your resources here?*

**CAREY:** We've been in D.C. so long. The Task Force had the first lobbyist on gay issues. We had the first lobbyist on HIV issues. So for us, we've been doing this work for a long time.

**MW:** *Is it time to hire another lobbyist?*

**CAREY:** We're looking at all our resources and the opportunities of the next year. We're assessing all the different states who've come asking for our assistance in training or organizing. If you ask three months from now, we could say, "This is what we're doing with the new landscape."

Certainly, which is why the policy book has been so powerful and so well received, we now have an administration that is interested in working with us on improving policies for LGBT people.

**MW:** *You will agree that this is a very exciting time to be in Washington?*

**NIPPER:** Absolutely. There's no question. This is a big time. It's not to say that there isn't excitement, but just to acknowledge that it's excitement in the context of the history of an organization that has been here for every big opportunity of the last 35 years and plans to continue to be here.

What we've seen so far with the transition team looks great. The policy work that we're doing, what we've shared with them, has been well received. We just hope that translates into the actual administration. We expect it to. And we'll be very noisy if it doesn't. We're looking forward to seeing how things shake out and being at the forefront of helping to direct it.

*For more information about the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, visit <http://thetaskforce.org>.*