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Gay activists end gathering recharged, laughing

By Jessica Fender
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"We'll say 'I can't,' cause we can't say 'I do,' " four bouffant-clad drag queens doo-wopped to a familiar tune on stage at Denver's Grand Hyatt. "Locked out of the chapel of love."

A national gathering of 2,000 gay and lesbian activists wrapped on a high note Sunday with the comedic crooning of The Kinsey Sicks quartet, an appearance by U.S. Rep Jared Polis and more than one joke about disgraced spiritual leader Ted Haggard.

The lighthearted end to four days of community-outreach training provided a much-needed shot in the arm for a group that suffered ballot-initiative disappointments in California and other states, said conference organizer Sue Hyde.

The success of Proposition 8 in California, which eliminated the right of homosexual couples to marry, left internal tensions and finger-pointing in its wake, Hyde said.

"People came here on tenterhooks," Hyde said. "Now we can send our people home with a renewed energy and renewed purpose."

The National Conference on GLBT Equality, put on by the Washington, D.C.-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, offered training on topics from organizing in minority communities to grassroots fundraising.

Headliners included Dolores Huerta, social justice organizer and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union.

Polis, who appeared briefly on stage Sunday, lauded the group for its efforts but jokingly pointed to the lack of gay bars in the 2nd Congressional District as a sign there is more to do. He and others expressed excitement over the election of President Barack Obama and a sense of hope for their Washington, D.C., agenda in the next four years.

"We're really on the threshold of making tremendous progress," Polis said, who is gay. "Americans are a good people who want to be fair. It's up to your work every day in your communities to show people the way."

Even the entertainers, which touted themselves as "Sonny and Cher, without the Sonny," expressed hope as the conference drew to a close.

"Last year was a very difficult year on many fronts. This year is a year for healing. Do something to make that happen," Winnie, leader of the Sicks, said before snapping back to parody.

The so-called "Beauty Shop Quartet" ended with the tongue-in-cheek patriotic number "We Arm the World."