Love,’ not rights – Future Messanging Of LGBT Groups

**Marriage | Winning recognition for gay marriage in America was all about spinning the right message**

[Susan Olasky](https://world.wng.org/authors/susan_olasky) [Vol. 31, No. 17 - August 20, 2016](https://world.wng.org/issue/vol_31_no_17) WORLD Magazine
Some on the same-sex marriage side have shifted their attention and money to fight against religious liberty... The Arcus Foundation gave $120,000 to the Religion Newswriters Foundation “to recruit and equip LGBT supportive leaders and advocates to counter rejection and antagonism within traditionally conservative Christian churches.”

In 2012, President Barack Obama said in an ABC interview, “I think same-sex couples should be able to get married.” A White House statement added detail: “It’s no secret the President has gone through some soul-searching on this issue. … He’s sat around his kitchen table with Sasha and Malia, who have friends whose parents are same-sex couples. … ‘And frankly,’ [Obama said,] ‘that’s the kind of thing that prompts a change of perspective.’”

Evan Wolfson, founder of national gay rights organization Freedom to Marry, lauded the statement. He had helped the White House craft it using research-tested elements: “We were thrilled that President Obama came out in support of marriage for same-sex couples using the love and commitment and journey framework that was proving so effective elsewhere.” Not talk about rights. Focus-group-tested talk about love. Love sells.

***You have read 1 of 5 free articles this month.***

It’s hard to remember now, a year after the Supreme Court’s *Obergefell* decision declared a right to marry in all 50 states, how unlikely that result seemed just a decade ago. Gay marriage proponents had suffered one defeat after another at the ballot box. But activist groups and foundations turned things around with a strategic plan, a state-by-state strategy, and money—$153 million, they claim. Here’s the story of how that happened and what’s likely to happen next.

**THE SUCCESS STORY BEGINS 16 YEARS AGO** when the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, established with the Levi Strauss fortune and eager to push for LGBT acceptance, approached Lambda Legal attorney Evan Wolfson for advice on where the foundation should concentrate its giving.

For Wolfson the answer was simple: marriage. The gay, Yale-educated, Harvard-trained attorney had been on the forefront of gay rights legal battles ever since he wrote his 1983 Harvard Law thesis—for which he earned a B—on the right to marriage. In that year the idea of gay marriage was radical, even among allies on the left. Feminists were tearing down marriage. Gay activists channeled their energy to fighting AIDS and employment discrimination.

The 5-foot-6-inch Wolfson, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Togo, Africa, thought differently. He believed “fighting for, let alone winning, the freedom to marry would propel equality and inclusion for gay people in ways nothing else could.” He had grown up with Democratic Jewish parents in Pittsburgh. He had so much self-confidence that he had invited President Richard Nixon to his bar mitzvah, despite his parents’ disapproval. (Nixon didn’t come, but he did send a note.) Wolfson was a practicing homosexual in Togo. If there’s a movie made of the marriage fight, an actor like Danny DeVito should play him.

After law school Wolfson moonlighted on gay rights cases and eventually worked full time with Lambda Legal. He acted as co-counsel in a challenge to Hawaii’s marriage law, defended a dismissed gay Boy Scouts leader, and challenged Vermont’s marriage law. By the time the Haas, Jr. Fund came calling, Wolfson had experienced both victories and defeats—and he convinced the foundation to give him $2.5 million to start a new organization, Freedom to Marry. By most accounts, Wolfson and Freedom to Marry led the fight that resulted in the Supreme Court’s *Obergefell* decision.

**IN A 2003 RULING**, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court gave gay people the right to marry, and proponents of traditional marriage responded. By November 2004, 11 states had enacted gay marriage bans. The next year, nine more did. Public opinion was roundly against gay marriage, but that did not deter Wolfson and other gay rights activists.

Money made determination easier. Funders with deep pockets stepped up to form the Civil Marriage Collaborative (CMC). Eight foundations and an anonymous donor agreed to coordinate efforts to win marriage in all 50 states. They promised the resources to get it done—and they came through.

CMC funder philanthropist Tim Gill, founder of desktop publishing software Quark, had established the Gill Foundation to fight for gay rights causes. A 2004 *Denver Post* profile portrayed the wealthy Gill as obsessed with politics and extreme sports. He spent more than $67 million on gay rights causes during the foundation’s first 10 years, and chased snowboarding, paragliding, and mountain climbing thrills.

The Haas, Jr. Fund support of Evan Wolfson was crucial: “We knew if they, as a non-gay foundation stepped up, they would get other non-gay support.” But foundation support failed to translate into electoral victory. Freedom to Marry acknowledged that “by 2009 the marriage movement had lost every one of 30 statewide ballot campaigns.” Those losses included setbacks in Maine and California, both states LGBT activists expected to win.

If activists had lacked a commitment to marriage as the end goal, perhaps the movement would have changed course. But activists and funders knew that winning on marriage would convey “intangible and irreplaceable security and respect,” as a CMC brochure put it. Winning would break down every other barrier to full LGBT acceptance: “No single institution reaches so deeply into our national psyche, or so broadly across so many different areas of our lives as does marriage.”

As the movement went back to the drawing board, the CMC and other funders made sure resources were available for in-depth research, focus groups, and ad testing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars later, the movement had an “aha” moment. The research showed the key message had to change from rights and benefits to love and commitment. Love wins.

Focus groups, long interviews, and trial messaging proved that “journey” stories—showing how someone’s opinion changed—resonated with conflicted voters. The best messengers: straight parents and grandparents of gay people who had long, happy marriages and wanted something like the same for their LGBT kids and grandkids.

Wolfson’s Freedom to Marry group became a laboratory and clearinghouse for messages, materials, and media training. Its “Why Marriage Matters” campaign offered “state-of-the-art research findings, personal stories, and ready-made tools like videos, graphics, speakers bureaus and house party kits to reshape the national conversation on marriage.”

Then in 2012 Freedom to Marry, “working closely with” the White House, gained “a Messenger-in-Chief”: President Obama. Its field-tested message became Obama’s: “In a single day, the President modeled the journey for all Americans, and gave permission to those who were most conflicted to join in support.” The change in messaging to “love” worked. In 2012, LGBT activists won at the ballot box for the first time as three states voted for marriage and Minnesota rejected a gay marriage ban.

Last year, touting the campaign’s success, Freedom to Marry called itself  “a story-telling machine,” successful in pitching emotional stories to receptive reporters. Using well-placed advocates, willing members of the press, and “earned media”—news and feature stories by allied reporters, rather than ads—Freedom to Marry created a “national drumbeat for decision-makers throughout the country, including the Supreme Court.”

Here’s one example: Freedom to Marry created a pro-same-sex-marriage ad featuring former GOP Sen. Alan Simpson. It made only a small media buy in D.C., Wyoming, and other 10th Circuit states (where LGBT legal groups planned to file a case). It watched as cable stations and media outlets amplified the message at no cost to Freedom to Marry. Influential and sympathetic reporters from *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* Politico, NPR, and CNN attended Freedom to Marry briefings and transmitted the message.

After the Supreme Court victory, both the Civil Marriage Collaborative and Freedom to Marry published self-laudatory case studies. The Foundation Center’s “Glasspockets” column summed up the lessons this way: “Through the work of the Civil Marriage Collaborative, philanthropy learned that when it works collectively and engages in storytelling about its beneficiaries, it can accelerate the pace of change. … Key to this was a willingness to invest in media campaigns … and then to humanize the case by showcasing stories featuring the voices of parents and grandparents of gay children as part of the effort.”

**WHO WILL TELL THE COMPELLING STORIES** that win hearts and minds going forward? Some on the same-sex marriage side have shifted their attention and money to fight against religious liberty. In March 2015, reporters and activists gathered at a Haas, Jr. Fund–supported media gathering in Philadelphia to hear speakers lay out an agenda for attacking religious freedom bills.

The Gill, Overbrook, Ford, and Arcus foundations are now funding groups like the ACLU and the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) to develop the most potent anti-religious-liberty messages. MAP has already published a guide for talking about what it calls “religious exemption laws.” Matthew Vines’ Reformation Project received $100,000 from the Gill Foundation in 2014 to weaken Christian resolve at its theological roots. The Arcus Foundation gave $120,000 to the Religion Newswriters Foundation “to recruit and equip LGBT supportive leaders and advocates to counter rejection and antagonism within traditionally conservative Christian churches.”

Gay activist Marc Solomon describes the LGBT movement’s newfound confidence: “Our community is one that people don’t want to mess with because we know how to organize politically and we don’t take no for an answer.”

**Nuclear messaging**

Perhaps the LGBT campaign sounds familiar. Earlier this year President Obama’s deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes bragged about how the Obama administration sold the Iran deal to a wary American public. The Ploughshares Fund gave grants to journalists, experts, and influencers to amplify the administration’s message in favor of the Iran deal. Example: Ploughshares gave $100,000 to NPR for “national security reporting that emphasizes the themes of U.S. nuclear weapons policy and budgets, Iran’s nuclear program, international nuclear security topics and U.S. policy toward nuclear security.”

In its 2015 annual report, Ploughshares explained how “proactive media work by Ploughshares Fund grantees, partners and allies helped amplify support” by generating 811 op-eds, 352 letters to the editor, and 227 editorials designed to reach crucial subgroups, including evangelicals. *—S.O.*

**Pulling the wires**

The LGBT campaign to damage the nuclear family and the pro-Iran campaign that will end up spreading nuclear weapons have a common ancestor: Edward Bernays (1891-1995), nephew of Sigmund Freud and founder as a young man of modern public relations.

Bernays was 93 when I interviewed him in 1984 at his house near Harvard, with walls decorated by photos of famous clients ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt to tobacco industry executives. (Bernays convinced women to embrace smoking as an expression of their liberation.)

Bernays maintained in the 1990s what he had declared in the 1920s: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.”

An atheist, Bernays proudly considered himself one of “the relatively small number of persons … who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses.” He was proud to “pull the wires which control the public mind” so that “vast numbers of human beings … live together as a smoothly functioning society.” *—Marvin Olasky*



***Susan Olasky***

Susan pens book reviews and other articles for WORLD as a senior writer and has authored eight historical novels for children. Susan and her husband Marvin live in Asheville, N.C. Follow Susan on Twitter [@susanolasky](https://world.wng.org/2016/08/%3Ca%20href%3D)">https://twitter.com/susanolasky">@susanolasky