

'Fighting for inclusion'

LGBTQ activists receive awards for acco

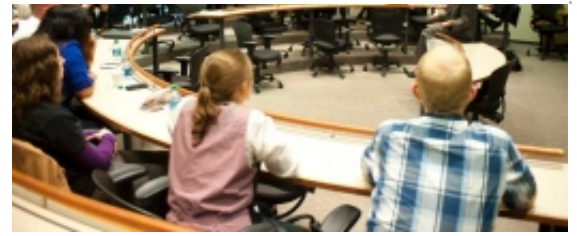
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Published: Monday, April 8, 2013

Updated: Monday, April 8, 2013 02:04

The Gay & Lesbian Alumni of Notre Dame & St. Mary's (GALA-ND/SMC) gathered Saturday evening for the presentation of the Thomas A. Dooley Awards, which recognize outstanding work by individuals on behalf of lesbian and gay Americans.



The awards dinner was the highlight of a weekend of events which included a GALA-ND/SMC sponsored dance for LGBTQ students and allies, viewing of the film "Love Free or Die" and discussion. The weekend concluded with a morning prayer service at the Grotto yesterday.

The awards united many community activists who have worked for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBTQ) inclusion, student body president Alex Coccia said.

"A lot of the speakers touched on the roles that so many people in the audience had played in some form or another, fighting for inclusion and equal rights at various levels — whether in South Bend, nationally or internationally," Coccia said. "It was a blessing to see how many people had been involved ... for me it was a cool experience."

GALA-ND/SMC presented four awards Saturday, each for different types of advocacy.

The keynote speaker and Thomas A. Dooley Award recipient was retired Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay, partnered bishop to be consecrated in a major Christian denomination. The GALA-ND/SMC website said the award specifically "honors individuals who, through their faith-based background, have demonstrated personal courage, compassion and commitment to advance the human and civil rights of lesbian and gay Americans."

Robinson ministered to the Diocese of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church. After divorcing

his first wife in 1986 and publically coming out as a gay man, Robinson began a formal relationship with his current spouse two years later. Though his controversial election incited much dissension within the Episcopalian Church, Robinson persisted in his efforts advocating LGBTQ inclusion within the Church, especially by calling for the Church to bless same-sex marriages and to willingly anoint well-suited candidates to leadership positions within its hierarchy.

Coccia said Robinson's address highlighted how much LGBTQ advocates have accomplished, while inspiring them to continue fighting for full inclusion in the Episcopalian Church and in American society.

"I think what Bishop Robinson highlighted is the necessity of really making the effort to push," Coccia said. "[He said] that is what the Christian calling is, that is what Jesus did, [Jesus] pushed for social justice, social change. That feeling resonated throughout dinner."

Coccia said Robinson shared a vision of a version of Christianity with the potential to incite great social change.

"Bishop Robinson talked about a wide range of things ... [including his sense of] Christianity as this radical and prophetic movement ... prophetic in terms of foretelling the present and really engaging with people to make social justice changes," Coccia said. "[Robinson] said the end is God and God is just."

GALA-ND/SMC also celebrated the work of Catherine Pittman with the Lawrence Condren Distinguished Service Award. The weekend's pamphlet said she was chosen as the award recipient in recognition of her "service as the faculty advisor for SAGA, the Saint Mary's College Straight and Gay Alliance, and her leadership in South Bend Equality's successful campaign that amended the South Bend Human Rights Ordinance to include sexual orientation and gender identity."

This ordinance was amended March 27, 2012, after five hours and 42 speakers by the South Bend Common Council, according to WNDU. The meeting was the third time in six years that this issue was brought before the council, the article said.

John Blandford, Notre Dame class of 1983 and 1999, received the 2013 Distinguished Alumni Award for his "leadership in our community as a found member and co-chair of GALA-ND/SMC in the '90s, as former chair of GALA ('99-'01), and for his lifelong commitment to HIV/AIDS education, treatment and prevention," according to the weekend's pamphlet.

Blandford currently serves as chief of the Division of Global HIV/AIDS Health Economics, Systems and Integration Branch in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Center for Global Health.

Sister Margaret Farley was awarded the Award for Academic Achievement for "her many contributions to the academic fields of theology and ethics, [most notably] her book, 'Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics,' which offers contemporary interpretations on sexuality

and gender,” according to the weekend’s pamphlet.

Each recipient spoke about his or her work to the attendees, but Coccia said the most moving part of the dinner was the final call to action addressed to all present.

“Regarding [inclusion at] Notre Dame specifically, I got involved as a matter of principle,” Coccia said. “I had read about the ‘No home under the Dome’ march that took place ... that was prompted by a comic and started a lot of discussion but there didn’t seem to be any concrete outcome of that discussion. Coming to Notre Dame, it seemed hypocritical that a Catholic institution with such a rich tradition of civil rights [and the status as] the place where the Church does its thinking wouldn’t be at the forefront of the [LGBTQ inclusion] movement.

“The fact that there are people who don’t feel welcome on campus, and the fact that there are people who have such harrowing stories of experiences on campus made it a lot more personal for me.”

The dinner helped to unite and solidify the relationships between the Notre Dame community’s LGBTQ advocates, Coccia said.

“You always have to have, in any sort of social movement or any sort of push that is driven by a lot of emotion and personal experience, you really have to have moments of solidarity,” Coccia said. “For me the dinner was one ... it puts a lot of things in perspective and makes it easier not going it alone.

“It ended with a call to action ... Bishop Robinson touched on how the role of a Christian, in many ways, is agitation for justice [because] Justice is God. In that push for justice, that’s where you find God.”