



Harvey Milk stamp unveiled at COH legal forum

by Matt Simonette

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Officials from the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) unveiled the Harvey Milk stamp at a legal forum at Center on Halsted June 17.

The forum, "State of the LGBT Union," focused primarily on legal issues that have been central to the community for the past year, among them marriage, transgender rights and job discrimination.

Mark Reynolds, a USPS Chicago district spokesperson, first spoke about the legacy of Harvey Milk, and why he was chosen to appear on a stamp.

Milk, according to Reynolds, united many different communities in San Francisco because he thought that, "When people of different backgrounds start to know each other, they find that they have so much in common. ... More than anything else, Harvey Milk gave people hope—that's one of the reasons he ran for office in the first place."

Thanks to Milk's legacy, Reynolds added, "There are far fewer closet doors."

Reynolds unveiled the stamp's image along with John Umphlett, customer service operations manager for USPS.

The forum itself traced a number of pertinent developments regarding LGBT legal rights in the past year. Participants included ACLU Illinois Board President Jill Metz, AIDS Foundation of Chicago Interim President John Peller, Equality Illinois CEO Bernard Cherkasov and COH's Community and Cultural Affairs coordinator, Em VanderLinden. The panel was moderated by attorney John Litchfield.

Metz, as keynote speaker, traced legal developments since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a portion of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013. "The world has never been the same," Metz noted. "One year later we have 21 states and the District of Columbia, and now Illinois has same-sex marriage. ... It's really been an amazing year."

Metz also reminded the audience that the LGBT community had not yet lost any of their legal challenges to a gay marriage ban, but did say that, since lawsuits had been filed in all 50 states now, a loss was likely at some point.

Cherkasov said that, despite the many victories, "We have to remember that in every state where there is now marriage equality, there have been attacks on it, including here in Illinois." With elections coming up, he added, "We have to make sure that we are voting for people doing the right thing by us."

Peller, speaking on matters relating to HIV/AIDS, said that the implementation of the Affordable Care Act was one of the most significant events of the previous year for men and women with HIV. "Remember, up until then, it was perfectly legal for insurance companies to discriminate against people with HIV [and] people with any pre-existing condition, and not sell them insurance. ... It is revolutionizing access to care for people with HIV."

VanderLinden focused on issues relating to the transgender community, and noted that their issues still need much work—there are fewer legal protections based on gender identity than there are for sexual orientation. "Oftentimes [for example] trans women of color are one of the most marginalized within the community in general; they're often facing a bunch of barriers to employment, benefits and housing."

Most of the panelists urged audience members to vote, and be cognizant of issues pertinent to the community.

"It took 20 years to get lesbians and gays and transgender people covered in the [state] human rights act. It took 10 years to get civil unions. It took two years to get marriage. It's because we were present and involved, and we have to stay present and involved, or else we are going to slide right back," said Metz.