

Article by J Craig Fong, "Building Alliances: The Case of the Japanese American Citizens League Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage," in Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work edited by James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 375-379. And reprinted in Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History edited by Walter L. Williams and Yolanda Retter (Greenwood Press, 2003).

After the 1993 Hawai'i Supreme Court decision in support of same-sex marriage, civil rights attorney Daniel Foley approached the Hawai'i chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), and asked them to endorse same-sex marriage. Both the Hawai'i chapter and the national board of JACL approved a supportive resolution in early 1994. However, the Mormon-dominated JACL chapter in Utah objected and called for a vote at the League's National Convention, held in Salt Lake City in August 1994.

In response, several Asian-American gays and lesbians in San Francisco and Los Angeles formed an ad hoc committee to lobby JACL members on behalf of the board's decision to support same-sex marriage. They asked J Craig Fong, a Chinese-American civil rights attorney and director of the western office of Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., which was serving as co-counsel in the Hawai'i same-sex marriage case, to address the convention. According to Fong:

The ad hoc committee, with keen knowledge and experience of both [Japanese-American and gay] communities, performed spectacularly. They created brochures that

explained the economic benefits of marriage, [and distributed] a question-and-answer handout that dispelled particular Asian myths about queers.... Finally, the committee organized a cadre of about one dozen pan-Asian queers that went to Salt Lake City, set up an information booth, and lobbied JACL members.

I addressed the convention on Friday, August 5. I highlighted the civil rights connection between queer issues and those confronting Japanese-Americans.... I pointed out mainstream America's long history of dehumanizing people of color by dictating who can and cannot be included in their families—that slaves were forbidden to marry, that slave families could be torn asunder, and that, as recently as 1967, interracial couples were illegal in sixteen states. The prohibition against same-sex marriage is, I said, another example of the government telling people what their families should look like. As I spoke, I could see eyebrows furrowing and heads nodding as, at least for some delegates, the connection was made. For them it was no longer about sex; it was about family. Now some of them understood that it was not a special right but a civil right.

Final debate of the issue on Saturday, August 6, was acrimonious. Although I felt my own presentation had gone well the afternoon before, I was not convinced that enough minds had been changed. Then U.S. Congressman Norm Mineta, a Japanese-American with a long respected history in JACL, rose and asked to address the convention. Mineta's remarks clearly framed the issue: JACL's credibility as a civil rights organization was at stake. [He said:]

I believe it would be disastrous if this Convention were to repudiate the action of our National Board in this matter. There are those who have argued that gay rights issues are not Japanese-American issues. I cannot think of any more dangerous

precedent for this organization to set than to take a position on an issue of principle based solely on how it directly affects Americans of Japanese ancestry.

When we fought our decade-long battle for redress [for Japanese-Americans interned in relocation camps during World War II], we won. We could not have done so if we had stood alone in that fight. Where would we be today if the [African American] NAACP, or the [Latino] National Council of La Raza, or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had taken the position that redress was a Japanese American issue—and had nothing to do with African Americans, Hispanic Americans, or gay and lesbian Americans? Those organizations, and their members, joined us because they understood and believed in our argument that a threat to the civil rights of one American is a threat to the rights of all Americans. They acted based on that principle—and not on a narrow evaluation of how redress affected their own communities. How can we as an organization turn around today and say that the civil rights of other Americans have nothing to do with us?

Mineta also scolded the delegates, reminding them that without the support of Massachusetts representative Barney Frank, redress for Japanese-American internees might not have happened. Frank, a gay congressman with only a tiny Japanese-American constituency, was instrumental in reporting the redress bill out of the House Administrative Law Subcommittee, where it had been stuck for many years.

The convention floor fell silent. I could physically feel the last opposition weaken and melt away. The vote was called, and the national convention voted overwhelmingly

to continue its endorsement of same-sex marriage. The members of the ad hoc committee embraced one another and cried....

The fear that legions of conservative JACL members would bolt the organization did not materialize. Only a few members resigned. Further, JACL found new members, as the ad hoc committee swelled to become one of its newest chapters, the Asian Pacific Islander Lambda chapter. And the gay and lesbian community gained a new ally—an ally with over twenty-five thousand members nationally....

The ad hoc committee was simply a group of queer Asian Pacific Islanders who realized that there was a job to do, though none was an acknowledged, high-profile leader of the national queer community.... Queers and people of color alike must recognize that homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, discrimination based on physical ability, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and other discriminatory isms all have the same roots. The same social dynamic created them all: the mainstream population's ability to isolate particular groups and characterize them as unequal, apart, and unworthy.

The radical right has also been successful in dividing us at a time when we should be standing together.... Which group will next be in the radical right's gunsights? The social dynamic is the same. Only the targets change....

If we as a movement do not find the wherewithal to approach, work with, ally with, and maintain meaningful contact with other groups, we have little hope to create the environment needed to secure our liberties and our place at the political table.... At stake is not only our freedom as queers, but the freedom of all people who can be singled out by a vicious, mean-spirited majority. If we cannot understand this and stand united against the tide, I despair of winning the liberty so cherished by us all.

