

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Barney Frank is Santa Claus

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My friend Barney Frank has announced he won't run for another term of elected office in the U.S. House of Representatives. If you're real quiet, you can hear the sounds of ecstatic cheers and "high fives" from the people across America who thought of him not just as Barney "Fag", but as the single strongest voice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender liberation in American history. He is their Santa Claus this year because he's promised that he's going to go up the chimney, like smoke that will drift away and never be seen again. (They really shouldn't count on the last part.)

In response to news of Barney's decision not to run again, some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people feel comfortable complaining that Barney the Congressman, who has represented Massachusetts' 4th congressional district since 1981, was not the fat, happy, purple dinosaur that sings, "I love you; you love me", throughout the children's television program. "Barney the congressman is rude and grumpy", some say. Yes, he can be, but no more so than Harvey Milk was, or some of the current executive directors of our community's national organizations are.

When I heard that Barney had decided not to run again, I cheered along with the Right Wing anti-gay politicians and pundits, but for a very different reason. I was really happy for Barney and his spouse, Jim Ready, who can now enjoy the moment by moment awareness of the love they share. Surrendering to love is very difficult to do when you're running from meeting to speech to fundraiser to voting session. Jim is a really nice guy, and I've seen how he enables Barney to relax and smile. Isn't it terrific that a man who has sacrificed so much of his personal freedom and privacy for the sake of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people can now take time to smell the scent of his spouse in bed on a lazy Tuesday morning?

Barney Frank is my Santa Claus this Christmas. He is the best example we have today of a famous, highly respected person knowing when to let go, to leave the stage, and to accept responsibility to his own health and happiness. His role modeling in choosing to be whole is a very special gift to all of us. Barney's footprint in the history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people throughout the world is much bigger than that of any other person, including Harvey Milk, Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, or Frank Kameny. His name will be remembered as the gay lion in Congress whose roar for 30 years stopped crazy Republicans and weak Democrats from impeding the progress of our movement. And now, he'll also be remembered as the man who had the courage to put his finger to the side of his nose and say, "Goodnight."

I love Barney Frank. On occasion, he's been rude to me too, though I'm certain he was unaware of being so. Far more often he has been exceedingly kind and respectful to me and to Ray. I confess that he has always intimidated me a bit because he's much faster on his feet than I am, and he takes no prisoners. But that's why I loved having him in Congress. Barney has been like your high-school friend who made other kids think twice about taking you on. I never worried when Barney

was in a televised debate that he would embarrass me as a gay man. More often than not, I knew that he'd make me laugh, if I could understand what he was saying.

Back in the late 1970s, before he was out of the closet, Barney called me in Boston and asked for my support in his probable run against Elaine Noble. "I can't, Barney," I said. "Elaine is a lesbian." He was not yet able to confide in me.

A few years later, when he was still not yet out publicly, Barney and I were at a private house meeting of gay Democratic big hitters, such as Bob Farmer, then treasurer of the Democratic National Committee. When it was time to leave, all the gay men hugged and kissed one another, but they shook Barney's hand. When I gave him a hug and kiss he whispered in my ear, "Thank you."

Coming out was as difficult for Barney Frank as it was for any other person from his generation, especially those in public office. But he did so, and as a result he lost the opportunity to be speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position everyone in both parties assumed he one day would have. He was made fun of in elevators and at luncheons by people such as Rep. Dick Armey, Republican House majority leader, who publicly referred to him as "Barney Fag". Between 1997, when Massachusetts Representative Gerry Studds left office, and 1999 when Wisconsin Representative Tammy Baldwin joined the U.S. House, Barney was the only openly gay person in Congress.

In his 30 years in the House, Barney has not only been the target of social conservatives who hated the thought of an openly gay congressman, as much as today they hate the idea of a black president, but he also endured near constant criticism from the far left of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community for not doing enough for us, or for voting for legislation they deemed anti-gay. Santa is regrettably leaving the House with a lot of bruises and scars. Is it any wonder you don't hear him say, "Ho-ho-ho"?

When you look in the stocking that Santa Barney has filled, you'll find coal if that's what you're looking for. For me, I find an abundance of happy and proud memories, the strength of a role model and mentor, and the message of self-respect and preservation.

I love you; you love me.