

Out-and-Out Organizers

Two lesbians bring the fight for equality to your front door.

By Sheryl Kay

Door-to-Door Warrior

To go from pacing the water's edge as a life-guard to knocking on doors as a political canvasser must have seemed strange to some people, but not to **Robin Brand**.

"I loved it immediately—meeting new people, talking to them about issues that mattered and the pressure of having to raise a specific amount of money each night," she says, recalling her first brush with community activism when a friend convinced her to join Fair Share, part of the Citizen Action Alliance in Massachusetts.

In a way, Brand continued going door-to-door, but in a much bigger neighborhood, when she was senior vice president for strategy and campaigns at the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund and Leadership Institute, the organization that leads the nation in identifying, training and helping to elect openly LGBT political candidates. There she helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in direct candidate contributions and often served as the Victory Fund's national spokesperson.

"Like it or not, money drives politics," says Brand. "During tough economic times, it is a challenge. But I believe so much in the impact of the work we do that I want to give people an opportunity to get engaged in our work."

Today, Brand is deputy executive director at the Victory Fund, where she oversees strategic development projects such as crafting a run for the U.S. Senate for Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.) and working with the National Association of Latino Elected Officials to increase the presence of Latino LGBT leaders.

Yet, despite all her experience in dealing with major national issues and international politicians, Brand says that the people who inspire her most are not necessarily the D.C. movers and shakers.



Robin Brand



Ging Cristobal

"I admire lesbians who choose not to flock to the big cities but instead decide to make a difference where they live, whether they are abroad or in the U.S.," Brand explains. "They are changing hearts and minds in places that matter most to them—their own communities. These are my heroes in the fight to win LGBT rights around the world."

Asian Persuasion

Ging Cristobal grew up in a household that did not conform to the strict gender roles common in traditional Filipino families. Growing up as one of six children, Cristobal thrived in a family where her headstrong mother was just as much the head of the household as her father—and he in turn shared housekeeping chores and openly nurtured his children. "That is why, growing up, I never had problems fitting in or feeling insecure and not accepted, because my family was my anchor and my source of love and strength," she says.

However, after she came out, it didn't take long for Cristobal to learn that not all Filipinos were as accepting. While attending her very first lesbian film, Cristobal joined in an all-women's round table where she spoke with women who told of the violence and discrimination they faced at work, from friends, at school, but mostly from their families.

"I went home really bothered," she recalls. "I saw I was so lucky that I had loving and accepting parents, but at the same time I knew in my heart that I have to do something."

Fast-forward 15 years of civil rights work for LGBT causes and today Cristobal is now the project coordinator for an enormous region—Asia and the Pacific—at the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. In Cristobal's region, 10 countries have laws criminalizing consensual homosexual acts.

"In Asia, lesbians are tolerated, but most of the time are discriminated against and face violence because of their sexual orientation and gender identity," she says.

One of Cristobal's most important recent projects is the launching of a 30-minute video that highlights the violence and discrimination experienced by the LGBT community in Asia, while showcasing their efforts to fight for equality, safety and decriminalization. It also is a call to action to governments to implement the Yogyakarta Principles—a set of 29 binding legal standards that outline how international human rights law applies to the lives of LGBT people.

Progress, she says, requires taking action and maintaining one's goals.

"Continue to create spaces for everyone to be stronger until you make things happen—talk more openly, do research, documents cases of abuse and violence, do legal advocacy work, challenge laws, challenge restrictive and backward traditions, help other LGBT groups to prosper, be the role model to younger LGBT people, be more out and slowly realize your dreams," she says. "Never give up your dreams." ■