



## Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)

by Tina Gianoulis

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The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), founded in 1985 by activists and writers Arnie Kantrowitz, Darrell Yates Rist, and Vito Russo, is a watchdog group dedicated to promoting accurate media representations of the queer community.

GLAAD works closely with media professionals to educate them about the diversity of the glbtq community and to provide them accurate information. It also trains community activists to work effectively with the media. Perhaps most importantly, it monitors incidents of defamation in the media and works to redress biased representations.

Over the past two decades, the organization has met with numerous successes in its struggle to ensure that America's movies, television programs, newspapers, and radio broadcasts provide inclusive, fair, and honest portrayals of glbtq people.

### History

GLAAD was formed in New York to protest the sensationalized and defamatory *New York Post* coverage of the emerging AIDS epidemic. The *Post* problem underlined the general lack of queer representation in the media--and the homophobic stereotypes illustrated on the rare occasions when gays *were* made visible.

Shortly after commencing its initial efforts on the East Coast, GLAAD began working in Los Angeles to educate the entertainment industry about depicting gays and lesbians in films and television.

The organization went on to establish chapters in Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. before becoming a national organization in 1995. Currently GLAAD's offices operate in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

### Early Successes

GLAAD broke major ground during the first few years of its existence. In 1986, it launched a weekly Los Angeles-based radio broadcast, *Naming Names*, which became available to 600 public radio stations throughout the United States.

The following year, after negotiations with GLAAD, the *New York Times* changed its editorial policy to mandate using the term "gay" rather than "homosexual" in its pages.

In June of 1989, 20 years after the Stonewall rebellion, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative Stonewall cancellation at the request of GLAAD.

In 1992, *Entertainment Weekly* named GLAAD one of "Hollywood's 100 Most Powerful Entities."

Sean Hayes, Megan Mullally, David Kohan, Max Mutchnick, Debra Messing, and Eric McCormack onstage at the Seventeenth Annual GLAAD Media Awards in 2006. Photo Credit: John Shearer/ WireImage.com.  
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## **Coalition Building**

GLAAD has been involved with numerous coalitions, such as local and national groups committed to lifting the ban on gay and lesbian military service members, the National Freedom to Marry coalition, and the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs.

In addition, the organization has actively supported hate-crime legislation, and brought attention to the hate-motivated murders of Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena, Arthur Warren, and others.

Perhaps most successfully, GLAAD has spearheaded protests against the anti-gay rhetoric and misinformation promulgated by such media figures as Dr. Laura Schlessinger and politicians such as Senators Trent Lott and Rick Santorum.

## **Annual Media Awards**

Through its Annual Media Awards, GLAAD brings special recognition to gay-friendly media and entertainment industry outlets. Past honorees have included Rosie O'Donnell, Elton John, Ellen DeGeneres, Diane Sawyer, Todd Haynes, and Eric McCormack. Such films as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) have also received awards, as have television series, plays, and videos.

Indeed, the media awards are now held in three different cities each year. In some ways, it has become GLAAD's most visible activity.

## **Current Projects and Leadership Crisis**

Under the leadership of executive director Joan Garry, who served from 1997 to 2005, GLAAD experienced a major growth spurt. During her tenure, the organization's fundraising grew from about \$2 million per year to almost \$8 million. She increased the presence of GLAAD in local communities and media outlets throughout America via its Regional Media Program and also made outreaches to media serving people of color.

Under her leadership, the organization also focused on such areas as publicizing the queer heroes and victims of 9/11/01; countering attempts of Roman Catholic Church officials to blame its sex-abuse crisis on innocent gay priests; and, in the Announcing Equality campaign, persuading newspapers throughout the nation to include same-sex wedding and union announcements.

Garry was succeeded as leader of the organization by Neil Giuliano, who was named President in September 2005 and served until January 2009. A four-term mayor of Tempe, Arizona, and a long-time administrator at Arizona State University, Giuliano expanded GLAAD's fund-raising and established close ties with the independent film-making community. He also reached out to young adults, communities of religion and faith, and sports media.

In 2009, Jarrett Barrios succeeded Giuliano as President. A former member of both the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Senate, Barrios was the first openly gay man and the first Latino man elected to the Massachusetts Senate.

Forty years of age when he was appointed President of GLAAD, Barrios became the youngest leader of GLAAD and, as a Cuban-American, the first head of a national glbtq organization fluent in English and Spanish. Married to Doug Hattaway, his partner of 17 years, and the father of two teenage sons, Barrios increased the organization's interest in the representation of parenting issues and in marriage equality, as well as efforts to engage Spanish-language media.

However, in June 2011, Barrios resigned under pressure as a result of revelations that he had sent letters to the Federal Communications Commission supporting the merger of AT&T and T-Mobile, apparently at the behest of AT&T, which is a major corporate sponsor of GLAAD.

GLAAD has faced criticism not simply for the AT&T fiasco, but also for having lost touch with its mission. In recent years critics have charged that GLAAD has become too closely identified with the very entities it is tasked with monitoring. The organization is now better known for its media awards than for its defense of the glbtq communities.

Some recent high-profile missteps by GLAAD illustrate its problems. For example, when comedian and actor Tracy Morgan ranted against gay people in his concert performances in 2011, even saying that he would murder his own son if he were gay, many critics felt that GLAAD was more interested in salvaging Morgan's career than in defending the glbtq communities. At the same time that many grassroots gay people were calling for Morgan to be fired from his lucrative acting job on NBC's *30 Rock*, GLAAD arranged an "apology tour" media blitz for the besieged comedian, who retained his job.

Similarly, when in the spring of 2011 the evangelical magazine *Sojourners* refused to run an ad promoting a Mother's Day video by the gay religious group Believe Out Loud, GLAAD intervened: but instead of condemning the homophobia of *Sojourners* and demanding that it run the Believe Out Loud ad, they negotiated to secure the right to buy an ad promoting the Ali Forney Center for homeless youth. They announced that they had somehow achieved a victory by funneling money into a homophobic publication.

The challenge for the new leadership of GLAAD will be to return to the organization's original militancy to counter the perception that instead of being a watchdog it has become corporate media's lapdog.

In addition, GLAAD needs to help further awareness of traditionally underrepresented transgender and bisexual people to the public, while expanding visibility of the full spectrum of the glbtq community.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.