



## GetEqual

by Claude J. Summers

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The direct action group GetEqual has gained attention as a result of its bold action, including civil disobedience, on behalf of the struggle for equal rights.

The organization was founded on March 11, 2010 by young activists Robin McGehee and Kip Williams. It was established to continue the message of anger and frustration presented at the National Equality March of October 11, 2009.

The National Equality March was born out of frustration with the loss of referenda on same-sex marriage and other rights; frustration with the alleged co-opting of the gay rights movement by the Democratic Party; and frustration with the failure of President Obama to fulfill the promises he made in his 2008 campaign for the presidency.

The march was called by veteran activists Cleve Jones and David Mixner, but those who responded to the call were primarily young people who had been stirred into action by the passage of Proposition 8 in California, which they attributed to a failure of strategy and vision on the part of the established gay political organizations, especially Equality California and the Human Rights Campaign.

Their disappointment with the loss of the campaign against Proposition 8 was compounded by their disillusionment with the Obama administration, which seemed to distance itself from the promises that had been made in the presidential election of 2008, especially its failure to end the Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy that precluded the service of openly gay men and lesbians in the military, to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), and to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

The march was hastily organized by McGehee, a communications teacher and mother of two from Fresno, California who became an activist by joining the struggle against Proposition 8, and Williams, then an online campaign strategist for Radical Designs, a San Francisco-based firm that builds websites for advocacy groups.

It was largely ignored by the established gay rights organizations, and promoted primarily through the Internet. Nevertheless, it attracted some 250,000 participants and featured speeches by such new activists as Academy Award-winning screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, actress Cynthia Nixon, DADT protester Lt. Dan Choi, and pop singer Lady Gaga, as well as Jones, Mixner, and civil rights icon Julian Bond.

The message of the National Equality March was that the glbtq grassroots had grown thoroughly disillusioned with President Obama and the pace of change accomplished by his administration.

Even more significant, many participants in the march believed that the Human Rights Campaign and other established organizations had become less intent on advocating for glbtq rights than on apologizing for the inaction of the Democratic Party. Hence, they felt a need for a new organization, one that would be more representative of grassroots aspirations, less interested in currying favor with the powerful, and more

assertive in demanding equal rights.

GetEqual was founded in order to fulfill this need. Its mission is to empower the glbtq community and its allies "to take bold action to demand full legal and social equality, and to hold accountable those who stand in the way."

In furtherance of this goal, GetEqual uses the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience of the 1960s civil rights and anti-war movements and those utilized by ACT-UP in the 1980s: sit-ins, pickets, disruptions, and a great deal of political theater.

With the support of philanthropist Jonathan D. Lewis and his political advisor Paul Yandura, GetEqual was born as a result of a retreat that McGehee and Williams held with 45 other activists at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee, where Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. had studied in the 1950s. The 5-day retreat in January 2010 concentrated on trust-building exercises and lessons learned from the civil rights movement.

As Andrew Harmon and Kelly Eleveld pointed out in 2010, GetEqual "is an amalgamation of grassroots passion, Beltway savvy, and well-heeled support. Conceived out of a desire to revive the legacy of civil disobedience as exemplified by the civil rights movement and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the group has both directed and inspired a spate of protests by activists nationwide."

The organization has sponsored actions that range from sit-ins in former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's office, disrupting traffic in Las Vegas and New York City, picketing the Ugandan embassy in Washington, D. C., heckling President Obama at fundraisers, to "glittering" politicians such as Republican Presidential candidates Newt Gingrich and Michelle Bachmann and, most dramatically, to chaining protesters to the fence in front of the White House.

It was the direct actions on behalf of the repeal of DADT that first brought GetEqual to national attention, especially the arrests of McGehee, Lt. Dan Choi, Captain Jim Pietrangelo, and others who chained themselves to the White House fence on several occasions, most notably in November 2010 when it appeared that the long-sought repeal of DADT would fail.

The November 2010 direct action at the White House fence also brought GetEqual to the attention of the White House itself, when the day after her arrest Brian Bond, Deputy Director of the Office of Public Engagement, invited Robin McGehee to meet with him at the White House.

The meeting almost did not happen because McGehee did not realize that the meeting was supposed to be off the record. She informed Bond that she would not have agreed to a meeting under such a condition and refused to promise to keep whatever was said in the meeting confidential. Bond proceeded with the meeting but said that he would only listen rather than respond to any questions.

McGehee used the meeting to make clear that the glbtq community was deeply dissatisfied with the Obama administration, telling him that she did not campaign door to door in deeply "red" areas of Fresno, California on behalf of a President who was failing to keep the promises he made to the glbtq community.

Although GetEqual has been criticized by establishment figures for its tactics—Congressman Barney Frank called them "tacky" and counterproductive—it is almost certain that DADT would not have been repealed in 2010 without the pressure applied by GetEqual through its demonstrations and civil disobedience.

As Paul Yandura has observed in reference to the DADT actions, "The protests and pushback that GetEqual,

the bloggers and others created, changed the way that progressives and others viewed the issue. They created a relentless urgency for repeal," as epitomized by the image of Dan Choi and Jim Pietrangelo handcuffed to the White House fence. "The visual from that point forward for Don't Ask Don't Tell repeal changed from being a photo of dogtags and rainbows to protesters and handcuffs."

Yandura also commented that a secret to GetEqual's success was that their principal donor, Jonathan D. Lewis, and their leadership had no ulterior motives: they "did not want access [to politicians], an appointment, an ambassadorship or any other patronage, they wanted one thing&mdash;to be equal."

GetEqual has not only successfully pressured politicians to keep their commitments, but it has also inspired other direct action groups. Channeling the deep frustration and longing of the glbtq community for equal rights, GetEqual has emerged as a significant element in the quest for justice.

GetEqual's most significant achievement is to have captured the energy and imagination of a new generation of glbtq activists, who are attempting to reclaim the gay rights movement as not simply a political movement but, more profoundly, a civil rights movement.

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**Claude J. Summers** is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com). In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.