



Chad Griffin. Photograph by Rex Wockner, courtesy rexwockner.com.

Griffin, Chad (b. 1973)

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In June 2012, Chad Griffin assumed the helm of the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest and most influential glbtq-rights organization. He was tapped for the HRC's presidency after exhibiting leadership in a number of political roles, including as fundraiser, political strategist and consultant, and as co-founder of the American Foundation for Equal Rights.

Many observers expressed hope that Griffin would bring a fresh new style of leadership to the organization that had been criticized for being too close to the Democratic Party, too elitist, and too aligned with corporate interests.

Early Life

Chad Hunter Griffin was born on July 16, 1973 in Hope, Arkansas, the birthplace of both former President Bill Clinton and former Governor Mike Huckabee. He was reared in Arkadelphia, a town 45 miles away. His mother and stepfather were educators, who eventually became high school principals.

He attended a Southern Baptist Church and did well in school, but was taunted by other students, who called him gay slurs. As he would later reminisce, the gay-baiters must have known something he himself did not know then, for he would not come out until much later.

Indeed, he has described his childhood as "infused with a sense of isolation and confusion." He told the *Washington Post's* Ned Martel that as an adolescent, "I didn't know that I knew a gay person." He continued, "I have a wonderful family, and I'm very lucky. But I knew there were certain tables you didn't want to sit at in the lunchroom."

Although Griffin would not come out to her until many years later, his mother, Betty Hightower, suspected that her eldest son was gay from the time he was very young. Nevertheless, the subject was never broached. When he finally told her, in 2000, she looked at him searchingly and said, "I knew that. Did you think I would love you any less?"

As a teenager, Griffin worked at the local Wal-Mart, but also evinced interest in politics. He served as a page at the state capitol. He was also deeply interested in international affairs. He spent a summer in Japan, and the year after he graduated from high school, he spent a year studying in Germany on a scholarship.

The Clinton Years

When he returned to Arkadelphia from his year abroad, Griffin enrolled for some classes at nearby Ouachita Baptist University. He also learned that Bill Clinton had recently announced his plans to seek the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. At a friend's suggestion, he drove to Little Rock and volunteered for the campaign.

Explaining that he was a news junkie, he asked to work in the campaign press office. He was accepted as an intern to Dee Dee Myers, head of the operation's communications office.

Griffin became Myers' "go-to intern." Whenever she returned to the Little Rock headquarters, she could ask the college student to "go get an answer on this, go call these 10 people," she recalled many years later, describing him as quiet, competent, hard-working, and "not empire-building."

After the exhausting but exhilarating campaign resulted in Clinton's victory, to Griffin's delight Myers asked him to come to Washington to help with the transition.

She ultimately hired the 19-year-old as manager of the lower West Wing press office. He thus became the youngest person ever to work in the West Wing. One condition of Myers' job offer, however, was that he commit to returning to college to finish his education.

Griffin stayed at the White House for two years before leaving to pursue his studies in international relations at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. His ambition was to become a foreign service officer. Indeed, in 1997, right before he graduated from Georgetown, he was offered a State Department job that he intended to accept.

However, before doing so, he received a job offer from actor-director-political activist Rob Reiner that seemed even more interesting.

Griffin had met Reiner when he was working at the White House. Reiner and his wife Michele were doing research in preparation for filming *The American President* (1995, directed by Reiner and starring Michael Douglas and Annette Bening) and had asked to be shown around the West Wing. Griffin was assigned the task.

He made a deep impression on the visitors. Rob Reiner later recalled to reporter Greg Kilday, "I'd never seen anyone with that kind of poise and intelligence for a young kid. It was just striking." He became friends with the couple and they kept in touch even after he left the White House to attend Georgetown.

Alliance with the Reiners

The job Reiner offered Griffin in 1997 was to help him and Michele establish a charitable foundation. Thinking the job would last about a year, Griffin accepted it and put his plans for a career in foreign service on hold.

He helped the Reiners establish the I Am Your Child Foundation. The foundation is dedicated to improving early childhood education and to raising public awareness about the critical importance of the prenatal period through a child's first five years.

That collaboration with the Reiners led not only to other collaborations with them, but to a whole new career.

In 1998, Griffin established his own consulting firm, which morphed into Griffin Schake, which he founded with Kristina Schake, his business partner who left the firm in 2010 to become First Lady Michele Obama's communications director. (The firm is now known as Griffin Schein.)

Griffin Schake may be described as a politically-oriented public relations firm. It is best known for its involvement in California ballot initiative campaigns, but it also conducts "philanthropy campaigns," "cause

branding campaigns," "issue management campaigns," and "crisis management campaigns."

In 1998, Griffin was hired by Reiner to lead the effort to pass California Proposition 10, which imposed a tax on tobacco products and directed the income toward early childhood efforts. To date, it has brought in about seven billion dollars.

In 2004, Griffin served as campaign director for another Reiner-sponsored initiative, Proposition 71, which authorized the sale of three billion dollars in bonds to fund stem cell research. In 2006, he led an unsuccessful campaign to establish an oil extraction tax in the state.

Griffin's company has also worked with numerous celebrities to establish philanthropic foundations and support causes. Among these clients have been Julia Roberts, Bruce Willis, Michelle Pfeiffer, Cameron Diaz, Jamie Lee Curtis, Julianne Moore, and Meg Ryan. Following the havoc wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Brad Pitt asked Griffin to help him establish his "Make It Right Foundation," to provide new housing in New Orleans's devastated Lower Ninth Ward. Griffin sits on the board of the foundation.

Other clients have included Warner Brothers, the Wal-Mart Foundation, the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the California Endowment, and Al Gore's Live Earth global concert series.

Griffin has also worked as a fundraiser for political candidates, most notably for Senator Hillary Clinton and President Obama.

Proposition 8

Like many glbtq political junkies, Griffin responded to the election results of November 4, 2008 with decidedly mixed emotions. On the one hand, President Obama, who had promised to be a fierce advocate of gay rights, swept to victory. On the other hand, Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in California, passed narrowly.

Griffin, who had begun openly acknowledging his homosexuality in 2000, had been involved in both campaigns. He had been one of Obama's leading fundraisers in California and had been a passionate opponent of Proposition 8, at first on the sidelines and then as part of the campaign to defeat it.

The campaign opposing Proposition 8 floundered in October 2008, when polls began showing a surge in support of the measure. Griffin was asked to come in to rescue the effort to defeat the initiative. His efforts helped stem the loss of support for marriage equality, but not enough. Proposition 8 passed with almost 53% of the vote.

Griffin was devastated by the loss. Almost as soon as the results were certified, gay groups announced that they were filing lawsuits with the California Supreme Court in an effort to overturn Proposition 8. On May 26, 2009, however, the California Supreme Court, on a 6-1 vote, upheld the ban on same-sex marriage, while also narrowing the issue to a dispute about a mere word.

Rejecting all the arguments put forward by those challenging Proposition 8, the Court characterized Proposition 8 as merely "carving out a narrow and limited exception" to the state's protection of same-sex couples, reserving the official designation of the term "marriage" for the union of opposite-sex couples as a matter of state constitutional law.

The ruling was a bitter disappointment to supporters of marriage equality, including Griffin and Rob Reiner. The two discussed the possibility of mounting a new initiative to reverse Proposition 8, but Griffin rejected that idea. "I'm a political strategist. I make my living by working on political campaigns and running ballot initiatives across the country," he said. "But I do not believe we should submit, ever, ever, one's fundamental, constitutional rights to a vote."

Reiner and Griffin decided to try a different approach: to go to federal court and argue that marriage is a fundamental right and that denying it to same-sex couples violated the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of equal protection.

To her surprise, Michele Reiner learned from a friend that former Solicitor General Theodore Olson, a Republican who had represented George W. Bush in the Supreme Court case that decided the 2000 Presidential election, *Bush v. Gore*, was a supporter of same-sex marriage.

Griffin flew to Washington, D. C. to meet with Olson. Though no commitment was made then, when Olson was next in Los Angeles, he met with Griffin and the Reiners in the latter's living room. He expressed interest in mounting a constitutional challenge. Fearful that gay groups might be suspicious of him because he was George W. Bush's Solicitor General, he suggested bringing in Democratic attorney David Boies, who represented Al Gore in *Bush v. Gore*.

When Griffin announced that Olson and Boies would lead a challenge to Proposition 8 in federal court, the news was not greeted enthusiastically by most of the established gay legal and political organizations, including Lambda Legal, the ACLU, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, Freedom to Marry, and the Human Rights Campaign. They thought the move was premature and risky.

In particular, they feared that a loss before an unsympathetic Supreme Court could set back the quest for equal rights for years to come. So suspicious were some individuals of Olson that they speculated that he might deliberately lose the case.

American Foundation for Equal Rights

When none of the established gay groups were interested in sponsoring the lawsuit, Griffin and Reiner decided to form their own foundation, the American Foundation for Equal Rights (AFER), whose entire focus would be to sponsor the federal lawsuit. They hoped that the lawsuit would ultimately establish same-sex marriage as a fundamental right throughout the country.

To fund the foundation and lawsuit, Griffin reached out to the gay community and Reiner to a handful of like-minded millionaires with an interest in equal rights, including Norman Lear, Steve Bing, and David Geffen, who provided approximately five million dollars in seed money.

Among those joining the effort were producer Bruce Cohen and screenwriter Dustin Lance Black--who had collaborated on *Milk*, the Oscar-winning biopic about pioneering gay-rights advocate Harvey Milk. Black was impressed by the daring of the enterprise. "There is a difference between AFER and other organizations," Black said. "You don't ask for less, and I think that's what other organizations have been doing over the past decade and a half. It's what needed to stop."

Griffin also reached out to former Chairman of the Republican National Committee Ken Mehlman, who had recently acknowledged his homosexuality and accepted some responsibility for the homophobia that characterized the Bush re-election strategy in 2004, when many of the state bans on same-sex marriage were placed on the ballot (and enacted) in order to increase the turn-out of conservative and anti-gay voters.

As atonement for the despicable strategy he helped execute for the Bush campaign, Mehlman helped raise more money for the Proposition 8 lawsuit and subsequently worked to raise money to help pass marriage equality legislation in New York and elsewhere.

Griffin helped select the plaintiffs—a lesbian couple, Kris Perry and Sandy Stier, who have four children, and a gay male couple, Paul Katami and Jeff Zarillo—and the case came to be known as *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, and then, *Perry v. Brown*—because the nominal defendant in the case is the Governor of California. When the case was appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States, it was named *Hollingsworth v. Perry*.

Proposition 8 Trial

The case was filed in May 2009 in the Federal District Court for Northern California and was assigned to the court's Chief Judge, Vaughn R. Walker, who was appointed to the bench by President George H. W. Bush in 1989.

In the course of the trial, which spanned twelve days in January and two days in June 2010, Olson and Boies systematically built their case around the history of marriage, the harm that denial of marriage rights does to gay and lesbian couples and their children, and the irrationality of the ban.

Introducing a massive amount of evidence, they demonstrated that Proposition 8 was enacted out of animus against homosexuals and that it caused great harm to gay men and lesbians for no rational governmental purpose.

The defense was stymied by the fact that they were unable to argue against same-sex marriage on religious grounds or on the inferiority of homosexuals, since such arguments would not be admissible as appropriate governmental reasons for denying a fundamental right.

Instead, the proponents of Proposition 8 were reduced to arguing that the only purpose of marriage is procreation and that permitting same-sex couples to marry would in some unspecified way contribute to the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage.

On August 4, 2010, Judge Walker issued his decision. His 136-page opinion demolished the credibility of the defendants' witnesses, systematically outlined 80 findings of facts established by the plaintiffs, and concluded unambiguously that Proposition 8 is unconstitutional.

Judge Walker's historic ruling was quickly appealed to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. On December 6, 2010, a three-judge panel of the Ninth Circuit heard oral arguments in the case. The judges asked both sides to discuss not only the substantive issues at dispute, but also the question of whether the proponents of Proposition 8 had standing to defend it since California's governor and attorney general both declined to do so.

On January 11, 2011, the Court of Appeals referred the question of standing to the California Supreme Court, which did not issue a ruling until November 7, 2011, when it decided that the proponents did have standing.

Meanwhile, the proponents filed a motion alleging that Judge Walker's decision should be vacated on the grounds that he should have recused himself since he is gay and in a relationship. Other issues such as whether the videos of the trial could be released were also litigated.

Finally, on February 7, 2012, in a narrowly focused decision, the Court of Appeals, on a 2-1 vote, declared Proposition 8 unconstitutional. The decision was stayed pending an appeal, first for an en banc hearing of the Ninth Circuit (which was subsequently denied) and then to the United States Supreme Court, where it was accepted for the 2012-13 term.

Although the hope was that a Supreme Court decision declaring Proposition 8 unconstitutional would include a ringing declaration that same-sex marriage is a fundamental right, that did not happen. Instead, in the ruling issued on June 26, 2013, the Court ruled that the proponents of Proposition 8 lacked standing to appeal the decision of Judge Walker. The result of the Supreme Court decision was that marriage equality returned to California.

Even if the epic battle against Proposition 8 waged by AFER did not yield the kind of sweeping ruling, Griffin and Reiner had hoped for, it nevertheless added important momentum to the cause of marriage equality, exposed the animus that motivated the discriminatory proposition and the fatuousness of the arguments in favor of excluding gay people from marriage, and returned marriage equality to the nation's largest state.

Moreover, soon after the historic marriage rulings at the Supreme Court on June 26, 2013 (including the striking down of the federal Defense of Marriage Act in *Windsor v. U.S.*, AFER announced that it would continue litigating the question of equal rights to marry. Olson and Boies soon took on Virginia's ban on same-sex marriage, which may lead to the Supreme Court ruling they sought in the Prop 8 case.

National Profile

Griffin's work with AFER made him a prominent figure on the national glbtq-rights scene. He has aptly described AFER's public relations effort as "perhaps the grandest public-awareness campaign that this movement has ever seen." The organization's active website serves to keep the larger movement for marriage equality in the news. In addition, the long and winding case served to make heroes in the glbtq community of the legal "dream team" of Olson and Boies and of the plaintiffs and others associated with AFER, including Reiner and Griffin.

Moreover, the promotion of the Proposition 8 challenge also included the production of star-studded readings in both Los Angeles and New York of Dustin Lance Black's play *8* that dramatized the trial and other initiatives that brought attention to AFER's work (and by extension to Griffin).

In addition, Griffin had served as one of several executive producers of Kirby Dick's controversial documentary, *Outrage* (2009), which documented the hypocrisy of closeted gay politicians who work against glbtq rights. Although Griffin's principal contribution to the film was to help raise money for its production, his connection with it served to associate him with a new gay militancy.

He was, thus, an obvious candidate for consideration as a replacement as head of the Human Rights Campaign, when Joe Solmonese, who had led the organization since 2005, announced that he planned to step down as president on March 31, 2012.

Griffin may have been an obvious candidate to consider, but he was also something of an odd choice for the organization. Griffin, after all, had earned a reputation for bucking the gay establishment. The very formation of AFER was a kind of rebuke of the gay establishment organizations, which refused to sponsor the Proposition 8 lawsuit.

Moreover, when the established legal organizations sought to participate belatedly in the Proposition 8 lawsuit, Griffin pointedly reminded them that they had attempted to undermine the case before it had been filed. He repeatedly refused to allow them to intervene in the legal proceedings, thus not only exercising a proprietorial attitude but also failing to honor a tradition of cooperation that the gay legal organizations had established.

But Griffin's independence and relative outsider status may have proved an advantage for him when he was

considered for the helm of the glbtq movement's largest and most visible political organization. The Human Rights Campaign grew in resources and influence under Solmonese's leadership, but it was criticized by many activists for being insufficiently attuned to the aspirations of the grassroots, especially for not challenging the Obama administration to move more decisively to secure equal rights.

Need for New Leadership

During the first two years of the Obama administration, when the Department of Justice was opposing gay rights in court and when the Democratic majority in Congress failed to move aggressively on gay-friendly legislation, critics accused HRC's leaders of having been co-opted by the Democratic Party and of being more interested in White House invitations than in holding the President and other politicians accountable for their failure to fulfill the promises made in the 2008 election.

Indeed, the National Equality March of October 11, 2009 was born out of frustration with the established leadership of the gay rights movement. The march, which was hastily organized in only six weeks, initially without the support of the major gay rights organizations, was called by veteran activists Cleve Jones and David Mixner, but those who responded to the call and made the March a success were primarily young activists who yearned for a new kind of leadership.

The contrast between the attitudes of the gay political establishment as epitomized by the HRC, which with about 150 full-time employees and a budget of \$40 million is by far the largest gay rights organization, was highlighted by the fact that on the eve of the March, when President Obama addressed HRC's annual dinner, he was greeted by picketers who criticized his failure to advance gay rights in the first nine months of his presidency.

In calling for the March, Jones and Mixner emphasized the need for a change of direction by the movement. Jones characterized the current practice of seeking rights on the local level as a failed strategy. "The endless pursuit of fractions of equality, state by state, county by county, locality by locality is not enough," he told the *New York Times*. "Until we get federal action, every one of those local victories--as important as they are--every one is incomplete and impermanent."

The immediate aftermath of the National Equality March was the creation of more grassroots-oriented groups like GetEqual, whose direct action methods, especially in pressuring the Obama administration for action on "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" repeal, was in pointed contrast to the more deferential approach of the HRC.

In some ways, Griffin's work at AFER also embodied the change of direction that Jones and Mixner called for in 2009 but in a less confrontational way than groups like GetEqual. The bold plan to go to federal court to establish same-sex marriage as a fundamental right throughout the country was precisely what many activists believed was necessary.

Ability to Reach Out

Another quality that may have worked in Griffin's favor as a candidate for the presidency of HRC was his willingness to reach out to Republicans. Despite his deep connections in the Democratic Party, he seemed more willing than Solmonese to be independent when necessary, as witnessed by his reaching out to Olson and Mehlman.

Griffin's willingness to reach out to find unexpected allies, at least for particular goals, seems to be related to his ability to understand the concerns of the religious conservatives with whom he grew up in Arkansas.

Griffin told a reporter about an experience he had on a flight home for Christmas a couple of years ago. He found himself seated next to the youth minister at a large Little Rock church. The two chatted and when

the conversation turned to faith, Griffin told the minister that while he grew up in the Southern Baptist church he would not today support the institution. "They preach bigotry and hate on a number of issues."

When the minister said, "We all sin," Griffin told the preacher that gays are born with their sexuality, and could not flip a switch and be straight, nor would they want to. "The most important thing for you to know," Griffin said he told the man, "is that if you've got a youth group with 50 people in it you've got multiple kids, whether out or not, who are gay. You are someone they look up to and whatever you do and say about this issue is going to impact them. They could be quietly contemplating suicide. And you yourself have the power to change that person's life."

Griffin's willingness to engage with people across theological and political divides, without in any way compromising his insistence on the need for equality, may be a valuable asset as president of HRC.

Reaction to Selection as President of HRC

When Griffin's selection as successor to Solmonese was announced by the HRC in March 2012, the response was overwhelmingly positive, especially from the gay blogosphere, who hoped he would bring a more aggressive leadership to the organization. At the same time, however, others noted with trepidation his involvement in the Proposition 8 campaign and in the 2012 campaign against North Carolina's constitutional amendment that banned same-sex marriage. Others pointed out that the corporate structure of HRC might itself be resistant to radical change.

Still, even before assuming leadership of HRC on June 11, 2012, Griffin exhibited unusual independence. He seemed more aggressive in criticizing policies of the Obama administration. He was, for example, openly critical of the President's slow evolution on the question of same-sex marriage.

Moreover, when Vice President Biden said on NBC's "Meet the Press" in May 2012 that he was "absolutely comfortable" with married gay couples having the "same exact rights" as straight couples, Griffin aggressively touted the remarks as an endorsement of marriage equality. When the White House and even the HRC were waffling on the question, Griffin told the *Washington Post* that "only in Washington and only in politics could someone parse the words of what the vice president said."

When, days later on May 9, the President endorsed marriage equality, Griffin issued another statement calling on members of Congress to follow his lead. "The American public has expressed interest in where their elected officials stand on the issue of marriage for gay and lesbian couples," Griffin said. "The president has had the courage and integrity to speak out for marriage equality. Now is the time for members of Congress to do so too."

Marriage Equality on the Ballot

Given Griffin's experience in running campaigns he may have been the best person to helm the HRC in 2012, when marriage equality was the focus of the November election in at least four states.

Although Griffin has expressed his repugnance at having a minority's rights subject to a majority's approval at the ballot box, he nevertheless responded effectively and aggressively to one of the first challenges he faced as president of HRC: confronting the four questions regarding same-sex marriage that were on the ballot in November 2012.

In Maine, voters considered positively adopting same-sex marriage in a referendum. In Maryland and Washington, voters debated whether to approve marriage-equality laws adopted by the legislature but challenged by petitioners. In Minnesota, voters decided whether to approve an amendment to the state

constitution that bans same-sex marriage.

Among his earliest decisions as president of HRC was to pledge \$250,000 to each of the campaigns fighting for marriage equality. The decision yielded success not only in helping fund the sweep that took place in the historic November 2012 election, where all four ballot questions concerning equal rights were answered favorably by the voters, but also in establishing HRC as a more aggressive organization than it had been perceived.

Griffin, however, knows that the quest for equal rights goes beyond marriage equality. As he told Chris Geidner, "I don't think anyone who knows me would say anything other than that I'm committed to full equality." He noted that "it's not any one thing that impacts the life of a gay person. 'We have to fight the battle on all fronts, whether it's school bullying, an inclusive ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act), or a whole host of other things, political or otherwise."

Griffin himself is neither married nor in a domestic partnership. He is, however, half of what has been described as "D.C.'s newest gay power couple."

He has been linked romantically for several years to Jerome Fallon, who accompanied him to the March 2012 state dinner at the White House for British Prime Minister David Cameron. In a gesture that set tongues wagging both in the mainstream media and the gay blogosphere, Griffin and Fallon were seated at President Obama's table.

After the dinner, Griffin told Karen Ocamb, "It was a tremendous honor and privilege to even be in the room and a grand surprise to be seated at the table with a war veteran, with the mom of war veterans, with the Prime Minister, the President, the First Lady – it was really a unique and special night."

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