



## Romero, Anthony (b. 1965)

by Claude J. Summers

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2009 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

In 2001, just a week before the September 11 terror attacks on the United States, Anthony D. Romero took over as Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union, the nation's leading public interest law firm and a fierce defender of civil rights for all, including glbtq Americans.

Romero, the ACLU's sixth Executive Director, is the first Latino and first openly gay man to lead the organization. Under his leadership, the ACLU has rapidly grown in size and effectiveness, but it has also been roiled by internal tensions.

He was born on July 9, 1965 in New York City, the oldest child of Demetrio and Coralie Romero, uneducated Puerto Rican immigrants who sought a better life in the United States. When he was a child, his father worked as a janitor at the Warwick Hotel in Manhattan and the family lived in a crime-ridden public housing project in the Bronx.

The Romero family moved from public housing when Demetrio received a promotion to become a banquet waiter at the Warwick. However, he was able to receive the promotion only after filing a grievance alleging discrimination.

Romero remembers the promotion as a pivotal moment in the family's rise from poverty and the successful resolution of the grievance as significant in his own decision to pursue a career as a lawyer.

He also regards his experience of poverty and stigma as the child of immigrants as having sharpened his empathy for the poor and stigmatized in contemporary society. As he told *Time Magazine*, "We bring who we are to our job. When you've seen prejudice, you understand that we aren't finished, that we're still perfecting this American experiment."

Romero was the first member of his family to graduate from high school. An outstanding student, he received a scholarship to attend Princeton University, where he studied at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy and International Affairs. After graduating from Princeton in 1987, he attended, also on scholarship, law school at Stanford University.

Following the attainment of his law degree, Romero carved out a career in public-interest activism. At the Rockefeller Foundation, he led a study of future directions of civil rights advocacy. He then served for five years as a Program Officer for Civil Rights and Racial Justice at the Ford Foundation before becoming the Foundation's Director of Human Rights and International Cooperation.

In the latter capacity, Romero led the program through a period of extraordinary growth, transforming it into the Ford Foundation's largest grant-making unit. He annually signed off on nearly \$100 million in human rights grants, including many to the ACLU.

During his period at the Ford Foundation, he also became friends with ACLU Executive Director Ira Glasser,

who functioned as a kind of surrogate father to him.

In 2000, after heading the ACLU for 23 years, Glasser decided to step down. He urged Romero to apply for the position of Executive Director and thus become his successor.

As Glasser later recalled, "I was probably as close to him as I had ever been to anybody in the funding world. We worked very closely as colleagues in the grantee-grantor sort of co-conspiratorial relationship. And he was always terrific for us. I always had a sense that he was very competent, that he was a good manager, that he understood money, that he managed a big budget, and, above all, that he seemed totally committed on a wide range of issues that were core issues for the ACLU."

Glasser championed Romero's candidacy through the selection process, and Romero was chosen Executive Director with unanimous support of the ACLU's Board of Directors.

ACLU President Nadine Strossman spoke for many when she said of the selection of the 35-year-old Romero, "It's just such a wonderful embodiment of the future of civil liberties and the future of this country to have someone who is so young and who represents the future of America, who is bilingual and gay."

Upon his appointment, which he described as "the thrill of his life," Romero remarked that "The issues that are most salient for me right now are the issues around equality, civil rights and civil liberties that pertain to minorities," adding "Within the foundation world, I've been an activist for affirmative action, women's rights and gay rights."

A week after Romero assumed his new position, however, the attacks of September 11 not only changed the course of history, but they also created severe challenges for civil liberties in the United States and necessitated a change of emphasis on the part of Romero.

Following the attacks, the Bush Administration pushed through the Patriot Act and instituted policies that threatened the openness of government and the rights of privacy and other civil liberties.

In response, Romero and the ACLU lobbied against the Patriot Act, winning some concessions and litigating other points of contention; challenged in court the National Security Agency's domestic-spying program; and litigated against the torturing, kidnapping, and arbitrary detentions associated with the "war on terror," ultimately securing a number of court rulings that checked the assertion of unbridled Executive-branch power made by the Bush Administration.

In addition, the ACLU won suits compelling the correction of the "no-fly" lists of possible terrorists and forcing the FBI and other agencies to make public files they compiled on peaceful groups, including the ACLU itself.

Romero has been particularly concerned about the effects of the "war on terror" on the American legal system, especially the presumption of innocence, and on immigrants. In 2003, he told the *New York Times* that the "war on terror quickly turned into a war on immigrants."

In the climate of fear generated by the Bush Administration, membership in the ACLU grew to unprecedented numbers, increasing from fewer than 300,000 when Romero assumed office to 600,000 in 2008. Moreover, donations to the organization more than doubled during these years.

Romero strengthened the ACLU by doubling its staff and significantly increasing the salaries paid to staff attorneys. He established a new Human Rights Program and funneled new money into the organization's 53 affiliates, many of which were barely functioning when he was appointed.

By increasing the presence of the ACLU across the country, Romero truly made it the nation's leading public interest law firm. As Leonard Rubenstein, the head of Physicians for Human Rights, remarked in 2007: "You can't underestimate the extraordinary work the ACLU has done over the last five years."

Rubenstein's assessment is echoed by such legal experts as University of Chicago law professor Geoffrey Stone and David Cole of the Georgetown University Law Center, both of whom have praised the work of the ACLU in the aftermath of 9/11. Cole remarked of Romero and the organization, "They've done a superb job in defending civil liberties, doing public education on civil liberties and challenging a variety of Bush Administration measures."

Romero's achievement is all the more remarkable because for much of the first five years of his tenure, he was embroiled in an acrimonious dispute with dissident members of his notoriously contentious Board of Directors. Ironically, and painfully for him, the internecine warfare, which threatened Romero's job, was led by Ira Glasser, his former mentor who suggested that he apply for the position in the first place.

Romero's detractors pointed to his failure to keep the Board abreast of a settlement he agreed to after a technical glitch in the ACLU website mistakenly made accessible to the public the names and addresses of people who placed orders for ACLU tote bags and other products and to his agreeing to vague anti-terrorism language in grant contracts he signed with the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and with the Combined Federal Campaign, a United Way-type fund for federal employees.

Although these errors were in themselves minor, the dissidents alleged that they were major scandals that betrayed Romero's lack of understanding of the ACLU's core values. They also accused Romero of attempting to intimidate his staff and members of the Board who criticized him. The battle was played out in newspaper columns, leaked memos, and competing websites.

During the bitter contretemps, Romero maintained the loyalty of a solid majority of the Board and the affiliates and of the civil liberties family generally. Leaders in the world of civil liberties such as the NAACP's Julian Bond, the National Organization for Women's Kim Gandy, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights' Kate Kendell rallied to his defense, as did such long-time ACLU leaders as Strossman, Norman Dorsen, and Aryeh Neier.

While admitting to have made mistakes, Romero defended his record vigorously. He told one reporter, "I'm willing to stack it up: what I've accomplished, what I've done, how I've done it, how I've conducted myself, what I've done right, what I've done wrong, what I've learned from it, what I've done to remedy it. I say, 'Open the kimono!'"

There has been much speculation as to why the dissidents, and especially Glasser, turned against Romero with such vitriol. Some of Romero's allies have characterized Glasser as someone who retired too early and became "a King Lear raging against his irrelevance." Others have attributed jealousy of Romero's successes as contributing to Glasser's disaffection for his protégé.

Some of the other dissidents are known primarily for their ideological purity and prickly personalities. Hence, their opposition is less bewildering.

Kate Kendell remarked that her strong defense of Romero was motivated in part because of a fear that at some level homophobia might be behind the attacks on him. "I don't want to engage in gay-baiting," she confided to David France, "but I'd be lying if I said it hadn't crossed my mind."

Under Romero's leadership of the ACLU, the organization has strengthened its commitment to securing

equal protection for glbtq citizens. Romero has increased funding for the LGBT & AIDS Project and repeatedly stated that securing glbtq rights is a core ACLU goal.

During Romero's tenure, the ACLU has participated in most of the crucial legal victories that have helped define glbtq rights, from the landmark U. S. Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003 to marriage equality successes in state courts. It has also worked closely with other public interest gay legal groups, such as Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights to coordinate strategy.

In recent years, the ACLU has been particularly active in securing relationship recognition, transgender law, and students' rights. Romero's strengthening of the affiliates has proved crucial in enabling the ACLU to respond quickly to local incidents, such as when principals or school boards attempt to deprive gay and lesbian students of their rights of assembly and free speech.

Romero has spoken eloquently of his personal resentment at the inequality he feels as a gay man in a society in which glbtq people are not treated equally under the law; and he has described marriage equality as a fundamental goal to work toward.

On the other hand, he has also said that he and his partner--a black, Cuban-born psychiatrist eleven years his senior--have no plans to marry. Indeed, the two, who have been together for over a dozen years, are not even registered as domestic partners in New York City, where they own a large loft apartment in the flower district.

In contrast to Romero's openness and activism, his lover is decidedly publicity-shy, allegedly because of his profession. "He wants his patients to not know anything at all about his life," Romero told David France.

Romero and his partner also differ politically. Whereas Romero characterizes himself as a libertarian who usually votes Democratic, his lover often cancels his vote.

Taking a decidedly higher profile than his partner, Romero serves on the boards of several nonprofit organizations and has received dozens of public-service awards. In 2005, he was named by *Time Magazine* one of the 25 most influential Hispanics in America. He has also been awarded an honorary doctorate by the City University of New York School of Law.

In 2007, he co-authored, with Dina Temple-Raston, *In Defense of Our America: The Fight for Civil Liberties in the Age of Terror*, which takes a searching look at civil liberties in America during a time of peril.

## **Bibliography**

Coates, Ta-Nehisi Paul. "Anthony Romero." *Time.com* (August 13, 2005): <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1093634,00.html>

France, David. "Freedom to Backstab." *New York Magazine* (February 11, 2007): <http://nymag.com/news/features/27839/>

Lewin, Tamar. "Civil Liberties Union Chooses New Executive." *New York Times* (May 1, 2001): <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/01/us/civil-liberties-union-chooses-new-executive.html>

Liptak, Adam. "For Jailed Immigrants, a Presumption of Guilt." *New York Times* (June 3, 2003): <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/03/politics/03ASSE.html>

Richardson, Lynda. "Public Lives: Liberty and Justice for All, with an Emphasis on All." *New York Times* (January 8, 2002): <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/08/nyregion/public-lives-liberty-and-justice-with-an->

emphasis-on-all.html

Romero, Anthony D. "LGBT Rights: A Core ACLU Issue." *Perspectives: Annual Update of the ACLU's Nationwide Work on LGBT Rights and HIV/AIDS*. New York: ACLU Foundation, 2006. 7-8. [http://www.aclu.org/images/asset\\_upload\\_file401\\_26559.pdf](http://www.aclu.org/images/asset_upload_file401_26559.pdf)

Sherman, Scott. "ACLU v. ACLU." *The Nation* (January 18, 2007): <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070205/sherman>

### **About the Author**

**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.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com). In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.