

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum (center) attends an Arcus Foundation Religion & Values program grantee convening, February 2010.



## Leading the Future



**In this issue: Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum's life traces the arc of the LGBT rights movement. Today, as the rabbi of New York City's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the largest LGBT synagogue in the world, she is one of the country's preeminent religious voices for progressive values.**

### NOW AVAILABLE

The Arcus Operating Foundation announces the release of a new report, "LGBT Rights and Advocacy: Messaging to African American Communities," offering new insights into the complex intersections of sexuality and race. Download the report from the Arcus Web site at [www.arcusfoundation.org](http://www.arcusfoundation.org).

Also in this issue, 20 people of color are participating in the 21st Century Fellows Program, a signature initiative of the Pipeline Project, which works to increase the number of people of color working within and leading the nation's LGBT rights, service and advocacy sectors. Rashad Robinson, senior director of media programs, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, who is one of the 20 Fellows, writes about finding his voice as a leader. The 21st Century Fellows Program is a collaboration of the Pipeline Project, Arcus Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, Gill Foundation and Rockwood Leadership Institute.

# Liberation through Religion:

**R**abbi Sharon Kleinbaum's life traces the arc of the LGBT rights movement over the last four decades. In the late '70s, when she started college, she believed that she was the only woman on the planet who was romantically interested in other women. Today, as the rabbi of New York City's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the largest LGBT synagogue in the world, she is one of the country's foremost spokespersons for LGBT Jews and a preeminent religious voice for progressive values.

Kleinbaum graduated from Barnard College, where she was an activist leader, and was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Before becoming Congregation Beth Simchat Torah's first rabbi in 1992, she was assistant director at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., and director of Congregational Relations at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, DC.

In 2009, the Arcus Foundation's Religion & Values program gave Congregation Beth Simchat Torah a grant of \$350,000 "to assume a national LGBT advocacy role within the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements of Judaism and within the larger LGBT movement." For Kleinbaum, this work is a natural extension of her core values and beliefs.

Cesar Chavez's farm worker organizing movement. We spent many Saturdays picketing outside the local supermarket. I canvassed for Gene McCarthy during his run for the U.S. Presidency despite the fact that we lived in a very Republican town.

My first major action was in fifth grade, when two of my closest friends and I led a campaign to get the school system in our town to allow girls to wear pants to school. We organized the entire school. We let the kindergarten kids color on the petition since they couldn't sign their names. The local newspaper wrote an article, the town got interested, and we won. That was my first taste of political victory.

## How was Judaism part of your political development?

My family was not particularly religious, but we were very deeply Jewish. In the early '70s, the public schools in my town were falling apart. A new Orthodox Jewish school had just opened, so I went there and became Orthodox. I was always interested in pursuing questions of meaning and purpose — why are we here and what makes our lives worth living? The Judaism of my childhood was very superficial, but at this Jewish school, I discovered other aspects of being Jewish: the historical, text-based,

nuclear arms or tenants' rights, but the Jews would not say that their Judaism fueled their activism. I was disappointed, because I knew that Judaism has as much to say about social justice as any religion. I didn't want to be Orthodox anymore, but I wanted to use my knowledge of the texts to build and energize a progressive vision of Judaism that was not just a Judaism of lox and bagels and "Oy vey," but a Judaism that could be part of changing the world, eradicating violence and creating justice.

## What led you to being ordained as a Reconstructionist rabbi?

I grew up in a Conservative synagogue, and attended an Orthodox high school where I became very Orthodox. However, in my senior year, I became uncomfortable with the position of women, which becomes clearer as you get deeper into the Jewish texts. I looked around the Orthodox world and wondered where I fit in. I knew I didn't want to get married, but I couldn't articulate why. Looking back, I think a piece of it was that I was coming out. I didn't see any place for me as a lesbian in the Jewish world.

In college, I became interested in non-religious Jewish "stuff," such as Jewish history, Yiddish and Eastern European Jewish culture. I started to get in touch with the radical history of Judaism. After college, I worked at the National Yiddish Book Center. While I was there, I became the unofficial "rabbi" of a community of hippie Jews who were living in the hills nearby. I loved being a bridge builder between the history of our tradition and what it has to offer, and the people I met. I was outraged that they didn't have access to Judaism that could enrich their activism.

That's when I decided to go back to rabbinical school, because I wanted to study Judaism as an adult, as a lesbian, and as a progressive activist. I wanted to be able to ask meaningful questions from a place of integrity and see what the tradition had to offer me.

The Conservative movement was not ordaining women, and the Reform

***I want to be part of creating a world where, thirty years from now, religion will not be a part of oppressing gay people around the world.***

## What are the origins of your commitment to activism and social justice?

I come from a committed family. My father was a pacifist and a conscientious objector in World War II, which was very unusual, especially since he was the son of a Jewish immigrant. I learned a lot from him about being willing to take difficult positions, regardless of their popularity. I'm the youngest of four, and my oldest brother was very involved in

intellectual, and spiritual sides of Judaism. From the Orthodox teachings, I learned that Judaism has great depth, that it is in fact more than just a cultural tradition, that the religious and intellectual traditions are profound.

When I went to college, I began to notice that in all of the political work I was doing, the non-Jews would say, for example, that their Christianity or Catholicism fueled their positions on

# A Conversation with Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum

movement gave you a psychological test to see if you were gay. If they thought you were, you couldn't get in. Then in 1984, the Reconstructionist Judaism movement passed a nondiscriminatory admissions policy because they saw homosexuality as a human rights issue, although they didn't think through the cultural implications. I entered the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1985, and started the "What Now?" committee to address those implications. For the next four years, I was involved in activism in the liberal Jewish world to transform Judaism from just letting gays and lesbians participate, to removing heterosexual bias, which meant rethinking Jewish family, family education, how synagogues are run and organized, and how we talk about sex and family. Ultimately, we had to address the theology, since Judaism is based on a heterosexual theology in which God is dominant and male, and Israel is subordinate and female. We transformed the school, and then we emanated out and transformed the Reconstructionist movement.

## What role can a synagogue like Congregation Beth Simchat Torah play in the movement for LGBT rights?

The major factor responsible for the oppression of gay people all over the world is religion. We want to be at the forefront of a progressive religious multi-faith movement that rejects all religious fundamentalism and is part of transforming the nature of religious discourse itself. Sexuality is at the center of this transformation because it's the thing of which religion is most afraid. Gay people have been considered sick, criminal, or sinful. In the United States, sick and criminal have been eliminated, but sinful is the category of oppression for gay people in all religions. In other parts of the world, they are still considered sick, criminal, and sinful.

If religion is at the source of the oppression, then I believe we can't just ignore it. We need to make it the source of liberation. Joining with progressive Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, we



Rabbi Kleinbaum and Matt Foreman, former executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, protest with ACT UP against the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, 2007.

can be the source of a worldwide movement to liberate gay people. We want to transform not just Judaism, but the major religious discourse in America and throughout the world.

## Why has the Arcus Foundation singled out Congregation Beth Simchat Torah's social justice work?

I think we're successful at what we do. We want our synagogue to be a place of personal transformation where people are changed and energized for their work in the world, and as a community we are changing the world. I want to be part of creating a world where, 30 years from now, religion will not be a part of oppressing gay people around the world, and that's what Congregation Beth Simchat Torah is doing.

We have let fundamentalist religious leaders monopolize the discussion of values, while we talk about human rights. They are two different things. Most human beings have an appetite for meaning and purpose in the world and want to live a life with values and principles. I believe we are a community of meaning and values and purpose. There is no monopoly on values and purpose.

I'm very honored that Arcus has singled us out. The monies we've received have transformed our ability to amplify the work we do. With funding from Arcus, we're training rabbinical students to work with LGBT Jews, we are expanding our training for ordained rabbis to care for the LGBT members in their communities, we are transforming our lay leaders into social justice activists and we're conducting a census of senior centers to analyze how they take care of LGBT older adults. We care about transforming the denominations, and being a voice.

## What most excites you right now?

I'm most excited about changing the debate about religion and LGBT people, and changing the assumption that religion is anti-gay. Though some religious traditions and leaders are anti-gay, many are not. It is our job to amplify their voices so that religion can be the voice of liberation for gay people around the world.

## What worries you?

The centralized power of the radical religious right is a terrifying force in the world. But I believe we shall overcome.

Rebecca Steinitz is a writer, editor and nonprofit consultant in Arlington, Massachusetts.



21st Century Fellows  
reception at Creating Change  
conference 2010, Dallas

# Mentoring



**W**e've all had them — those professional moments filled with tension and terror. Yet we pull through, and as time passes, can look back and realize that some of those experiences were career defining.

One moment in particular stands out for me. After a little over a year and half with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), I was promoted from director of the field program to senior director of programs, overseeing all of the organization's programmatic work. As part of my new responsibilities, I had to present on my department's work before GLAAD's national board of directors, the majority of whom I had never met. I prepared diligently every night for a week, soliciting advice from mentors and working hard to anticipate the board's questions. I was nervous and just beginning to find my voice as a leader.

Despite my nerves, my preparation allowed me to deliver the presentation without notes, tell stories about GLAAD's impact, and field difficult questions from

the distinguished group. When I was finished, I looked to my left and made eye contact with Dr. Yvette Burton, who was then a newer member of the board. She nodded her head, smiled, and in a very subtle and sophisticated way, snapped her fingers. It was a huge sign of approval from a successful and accomplished African American woman to a young, newly promoted African American man. Essentially it was code for "You made us proud. Nice job." What a great moment that was.

Not long into Yvette's tenure on the board, she was elected co-chair, making her the first African American board chair in GLAAD's history. Whether it was her ability to clarify the issues at hand or manage the various opinions and interests of the board, I watched in awe as she communicated with grace, integrity and precision. She sent a powerful message to me that I belonged and that leadership in this organization and movement was possible. It wasn't

long before I began to ask her for advice and insight. Yvette did not play favorites. She asked tough questions and often challenged me to reexamine my ideas.

I'm acutely aware of how Yvette's mentorship and leadership, and that of other leaders have and will continue to impact my career. This is why I applied for the 21st Century Fellows Program, made possible through funding by the Arcus Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and Gill Foundation.

The 21st Century Fellows Program is a signature initiative of the Pipeline Project, which works to increase the number of people of color working within and leading the nation's LGBT rights, service and advocacy sectors. The program is the vision of longtime movement leader Clarence Patton, who is the founder, developer, and program director of the Pipeline Project and former executive director of the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs and the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project.

# Leadership



**BERNADETTE BROWN**  
Director of Policy  
Triangle Foundation/  
Michigan Equality – Detroit, MI

**I often refer to the Pipeline Project as the Lifeline Project because that's exactly what it feels like to me. Clarence, the funders, the fellows and the facilitators comprise an invaluable support and leadership network for which I am eternally grateful.**



**JUAN MARTINEZ**  
Development Director  
Basic Rights Oregon/Basic Rights  
Education Fund – Portland, OR

**The 21st Century Fellows program provides the opportunity to share ideas, concerns and experiences with each other with an open and honest approach. It is a situation that is rare, so to have this chance to build genuine and trusting relationships with the other fellows is simply incredible and so valuable to each of our personal growth and professional development.**



**WANJA MUGUONGO**  
Program Manager  
UHAJ: East African Sexual  
Health and Rights Initiative  
– Nairobi, Kenya

**This is an excellent leadership program and I am honored to be a part of it.**

The Arcus Foundation, like its partners in funding the 21st Century Fellows Program, understands how challenging it has been historically to retain people of color who seek to commit themselves to service in the LGBT movement – and how rarely we create opportunities to provide current and future leaders with resources to develop their talents and abilities.

In my five years in the LGBT equality movement, I have personally witnessed the consequences of this problem play out time and time again, as talented and committed peers have burned out from lack of support or left the movement because they did not see leadership paths for people who look like them.

The 21st Century Fellows Program is working to change that. This year's inaugural class of fellows, of which I am privileged to be a member, comes from broad cross-sections of age, geography, and experience representing much of the diversity of work taking place across the movement.



It wasn't long into our first meeting together during the Rockwood Leadership Institute's Art of Collaborative Leadership retreat, a nationally renowned workshop for social change, that the 20 newly announced fellows were trading ideas for collaboration, discussing our responsibilities

to one another and to other people of color in the movement, and truly grappling with what it will take to support one another's work and to hold one another accountable.

The value of the 21st Century Fellows Program goes beyond the amazing

# The 21st Century Fellows Program

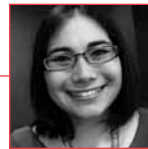
By Rashad Robinson



## ANDRÉS HOYOS

Associate Director  
Center CARE Wellness  
The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender  
Community Center – New York, NY

“This has been one of the most enriching experiences in my life, personally and professionally. It has helped me to improve my leadership skills and expand my professional network, but most importantly, it has helped me to become an agent of change for social justice within the LGBT movement while reconnecting with my passion.”



## CATHERINE SAKIMURA

Staff Attorney and Family  
Protection Project Coordinator  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
– San Francisco, CA

“The 21st Century Fellows Program has given me an amazing support network to help me take my work and leadership to the next level.”



## JONATHAN LANG

Director  
New York State LGBT Health  
and Human Services Network  
Empire State Pride Agenda – New York, NY

“The 21st Century Fellows Program has provided the space for a frank, candid dialogue about the joys and challenges of working within the LGBT movement and being a person of color, while also providing the fellows the skills needed to be leaders of tomorrow.”

resources offered and the access we have to experts, leaders and mentors. It's also the fact that 20 of us now know that we are not alone as we contend with the daily pressures of leadership while representing our professional and personal identities inside the movement and out.

The mentorship, support and coaching we receive from leaders like Clarence Patton, Michael Bell, co-founder, president and CEO of InPartnership Consulting Inc., and the Rockwood Leadership Institute doesn't stay inside the room. And it isn't meant to. We are focused on building these skills so that we can export them into our organizations, our work, the communities we serve, and the coming generations of our movement's leaders.

In truth, the impact of the 21st Century Fellows Program — and the significant investment that the Arcus Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and Gill Foundation have made in this vital work — is realized when the training, the relationships and the learning

experiences are replicated outside of the program; when each of us makes good on our responsibility to the interns, junior staff, and rising leaders within our organizations; and when we have leveraged our experiences with solid decision-making, accomplishment and career advancement.

For me — and I suspect many of the other fellows — this experience is about remembering that our visible leadership in the movement for equality is in itself a powerful message. Whether we're standing and delivering, holding one another accountable, or offering subtle finger snaps of approval, we tell our brothers and sisters of color that they too can find their voices as future leaders.

**Rashad Robinson is senior director of media programs at GLAAD, where he leads all of the organization's programmatic and advocacy work. He has been with GLAAD for five years and works out of the organization's New York City office.**

*The 21st Century Fellows Program is supported in part by the Arcus Foundation's Racial Justice, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Program, which works to increase the power and influence of LGBT people of color organizations and leaders, and strengthen the LGBT movement's commitment to racial justice. For more information, contact Roz Lee, senior program officer, Racial Justice, Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity program at [roz@arcusfoundation.org](mailto:roz@arcusfoundation.org).*



**Twenty of us now know that we are not alone as we contend with the daily pressures of leadership while representing our professional and personal identities inside the movement and out.**

—RASHAD ROBINSON senior director of media programs, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – New York, NY

## 21st Century Fellows Complete Listing

Each of the 20 Fellows is a manager at an LGBT organization that is a current grantee of the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, the Arcus Foundation or the Gill Foundation. The Fellows include 18 managers from U.S. LGBT organizations and two from Africa.

- **Eva N. Boyce**  
Chief Financial Officer  
Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders – Boston, MA
- **Bernadette Brown**  
Director of Policy, Triangle Foundation/Michigan Equality – Detroit, MI
- **Mushin Hendricks**  
Imam, The Inner Circle – Cape Town, South Africa
- **Andrés Hoyos**  
Associate Director of Center CARE Wellness, The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center – New York, NY
- **Jonathan Lang**  
Director of the New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network, Empire State Pride Agenda – New York, NY
- **Kelly Lewis**  
Community Organizer, OutFront Minnesota – Minneapolis, MN
- **Rebecca Libed**  
Deputy Director of Development, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission – New York, NY
- **L. Indra Lusero**  
Assistant Director, The Palm Center – Denver, CO
- **Juan Martinez**  
Development Director, Basic Rights Oregon/Basic Rights Education Fund – Portland, OR
- **Wanja Muguongo**  
Program Manager, UHA1: East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative – Nairobi, Kenya
- **Tawal Panyacosit Jr.**  
Director, API Equality, Chinese for Affirmative Action – San Francisco, CA
- **Sung Won Park**  
Project Manager, Intersections International – New York, NY
- **Rashad Robinson**  
Senior Director of Media Programs, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – New York, NY
- **Francisco Roqué**  
Director of Community Health, Gay Men's Health Crisis – New York, NY
- **Catherine Sakimura**  
Staff Attorney and Family Protection Project Coordinator, National Center for Lesbian Rights – San Francisco, CA
- **Reverend Roland Stringfellow**  
Coordinator of the Bay Area Coalition of Welcoming Congregations, The Center for
- **Beverly Tillery**  
Director of Community Education and Advocacy, Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund – New York, NY
- **Hector Vargas**  
Director, Education & Public Affairs Department, Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund – New York, NY
- **George B. Walker, Jr.**  
Vice President, Leadership Initiatives, Gay & Lesbian Leadership Institute – Washington, DC
- **Javarré Cordero Wilson**  
3MV Program Coordinator, Black Coalition on AIDS – San Francisco, CA



Sabinyo Volcano, Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, home to the endangered mountain gorilla

**Fall ascent: Collaborative Leadership**

The Fall 2010 issue of Ascent will profile the collaborative leadership of the members of the International Primate Protection League and the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance, two groups whose members are working together to find solutions to aid the plight of endangered great apes threatened by habitat destruction, disease, and the bushmeat and pet trades. Visit the Arcus Foundation's Web site at [www.arcusfoundation.org](http://www.arcusfoundation.org) to read more about its Great Apes Program.

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