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Glenda Testone

by **Nikki Dowling**



On September 15, Glenda Testone, a life-long LGBT activist and leader, was named the first-ever female executive director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center in New York City. The Center has been around for 26 years and is home to more than 300 health-related, civic, and cultural groups. Its events calendar reaches over 60,000 people each month. Syracuse, New York-born Testone is now in charge of the largest LGBT multi-service organization on the East Coast and second largest LGBT community center in the world.

Even calling Testone's appointment a big deal sounds like an understatement. Her job is huge. Thousands of people depend on The Center for support, entertainment, fun, and help. The Center also hosts numerous events for everyone, from the Queer Men's Erotic Art Workshop and Mastering the Manly Art of Seduction to book discussion groups, GED classes, and bingo. The Center is not afraid to tackle difficult issues, holding yoga sessions for HIV-positive men, bereavement groups, and networking events for women with cancer. "Wherever folks are in

their life path there's something for them to connect to and get at The Center," Testone says.

When Richard Burns, the executive director for 22 years, decided to end his run, a group of board members conducted a nationwide hiring search and picked Testone. They said, "We found a dynamic leader who we believe will be at the forefront of the next generation of advocacy and services for the LGBT community. Glenda inspired all of us and we cannot wait to begin the next chapter of The Center's history under her leadership."

Testone didn't come from nowhere and suddenly get appointed to this important position. She received her masters in Women's Studies from Ohio State University and soon afterward began working at GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation). Interestingly, she began as a straight ally and didn't come out until she was 27. The change came when Testone fell in love with a woman while working at GLAAD. "It was amazing...picturing my entire life differently," Testone remembered. The two were together for five and a half years.

One of Testone's first big accomplishments came at GLAAD in 2003 when she convinced the New York Times to include same-sex marriage announcements on their wedding pages. It wasn't easy; the Times had resisted prior attempts to change this policy. "We really, really had to convince them," Testone reminisced. Newspapers all over the country have since followed suit.

After GLAAD, Testone moved on to the Women's Media Center, an organization devoted to making women visible and powerful in the media. For the past three years, she served as the organization's vice president. During her time there, Testone started the Progressive Women's Voices Training Program, which helps train forward-thinking women to be spokespeople for themselves and the LGBT community. About 60 women have been trained but there are about 100 to 150 applicants for every ten openings. Students there learn to blog, stay composed during panel discussions, write op-eds, speak on broadcast news programs, and get their message to a large audience. Past participants have included financial analysts, teachers, writers, scientists, activists, lawyers, bloggers, and more. Thanks to this training program these women have been published in the New York Times, New York magazine, and the Wall Street Journal,

and have aired their views on Good Morning America, CNN, MSNBC, CBS Nightly News, Fox News, ABC News, and more.

Testone approaches her job as executive director of The Center with the same unparalleled energy, passion, and enthusiasm she uses to tackle everything. “It’s a big job, but I’m just excited to take it on,” Testone said, “I’m just over the moon that my job is to make sure other people know how important The Center is.”

Of course, nothing is perfect, including The Center, and one of Testone’s big tests will be how well she improves it. Testone plans to completely immerse herself in her new environment. She wants to understand The Center from all perspectives—donor, user, worker, and volunteer—so she can figure out how to best serve everyone. Her immediate goal is to get the word out, make sure that people all over the city know what is going on at the Center and are aware that there is something for them.

Knowing there is something for you is especially important for lesbians. In a city as large as Manhattan sometimes lesbians get lost in the shuffle. Although Testone loves NYC she said, “I wish there were more bars that catered to women specifically.” Testone said bars that do have lesbian events, hold them on inconvenient nights, like Wednesday and Sunday. For busy, working women, drinking and dancing on weeknights is not an option. Where the New York City lesbian bar scene is lacking, The Center is picking up the slack. “There’s a lot more going on for women than I think most people know or expect,” Testone said. The Center has free mammography screenings, lesbian cinema, and Sistah’s Sex Series, a program that’s all about fantasies and fetishes. Last November, Testone herself was introduced at one of these female-focused gatherings. The occasion was Women’s Event 12, a gala dinner with cocktails, and a silent auction. Kelli O’Donnell and actress Molly Ringwald were also there.

Even in New York, often seen as a mecca of openness and forward-thinking people, Testone knows there is still more work to be done. Homophobia is everywhere, even in the Big Apple. Testone remembers how people acted when she held hands with a man on the subway and, now, with women, she notices reactions are markedly different. She doesn’t say how but I don’t have to ask. The look on her face says clearly that the change has not been for the better. I know the looks well. Or, rather, the stares. In Manhattan, lesbians cannot kiss on a street corner without hearing catcalls and dirty remarks. People gawk at and hit on women, even if the two women are obviously together.

Testone, an attractive, feminine-looking woman, experiences problems with this often. She gets annoyed when, because of her feminine look, people “make a lot of assumptions that aren’t true.” Occasionally, she says, her butch and trans friends get harassed on the street. Some days LGBT couples are left alone, but other days lesbian couples are offered threesomes at every turn and men holding hands are met with looks of disgust.

So it should come as no surprise that, sometimes, Testone likes to get away. She doesn’t go too far because, she said, “I’m really an East Coast girl at heart.” Lately, Testone and her girlfriend have been taking weekend trips to quaint areas within driving distance of New York City. She enjoys going to New Hope, Pennsylvania, a small village located about an hour outside Manhattan. New Hope is nestled near the Delaware River and is filled with shops, historic sites, and art galleries. While in New Hope, Testone likes to stay at the Wedgwood Inn Bed and Breakfast, which she described as, “very gay-friendly.”

When Testone does leave the East Coast she likes places with fresh food, hiking, and the ocean. “I’m a strange New Yorker in that I love Los Angeles,” she said smiling. Testone also likes visiting her gay and lesbian friends in San Francisco, Atlanta, and Seattle. Once, she went to St. Croix, part of the US Virgin Islands, and stayed at Sandcastles, which, she said, was very gay-friendly. Testone seems an easy-going traveler who enjoys quaint towns and good times with friends. However she did have one important travel rule: “If I’m going to go away, I never want to be worried,” she says firmly.

Despite the fact that Testone has devoted her life to making changes in favor of the LGBT community, she doesn’t seem to have an overly negative view of the world and isn’t pessimistic. When I asked if she had ever suffered or been slighted because of her gender or sexuality she went quiet then answered with a resounding, “No.” It is this good fortune that has inspired Testone. “I feel compelled to give back because...I feel very lucky and I feel like that means that I need to look around me and make sure that everybody else has the same opportunities.”