

GRAULTY LEAVES GREAT LEGACY BEHIND



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COMMENTARY



BY BELINDA A. AQUINO

It was an election unlike any other in Hawaii's history. And for that matter any other place in the nation or elsewhere. This "uniqueness" of the September 21 primary election was due to the fact that such an extremely complex and unconventional issue as "same-sex marriage" took center stage in the campaign and polarized the electorate into "for" and "against" arenas, at times becoming an ugly confrontation between competing forces. It was like a morality play between good and evil. The emotionally-charged atmosphere of the election was intensified by an ongoing landmark trial in a Honolulu court, which was to rule on the legalization of same-sex marriage brought about by the lawsuit of three sets of plaintiffs.

As chairman of the Judiciary Committee of the State Senate, Rey Grauly was faced with the agonizing task of having to deal with the barrage of pressure on both sides of the issue coming from motley groups and individuals of hard-line persuasions. Just handling the escalation of arguments on this contentious issue on a day-to-day basis alone must have been already trying for the beleaguered Grauly. But he never lost his cool and conscientiously went about his Committee's work for which there were no precedents in the state and probably in the nation. In the end, he took the principled stand of suggesting a compromise bill for "domestic partnerships."

I am certain he was motivated by the best of intentions. He wasn't trying to obfuscate the issue. He tried to make the best of a bad situation. One tries to negotiate a compromise between competing views. That's what politics is all about. Grauly could have taken the easy way out as a matter of expediency. He chose instead to save the situation by putting forward a compromise solution, rather than cave in to the pressure on both sides.

At the same time, there were maneuvers to introduce other related legislation, such as letting the people decide the issue in a referendum. And Grauly was trying to stave off this last minute maneuvers, earning the ire of religious conservatives in the process.

The tragedy of it all was that Grauly's stand was interpreted as pro-gay marriage, that "domestic partnership" was just another name for "same-sex marriage," *ad hominem*. Lost in the heat of the rhetoric and intensity of the debate was a dispassionate discussion of the issue and the larger question of the civil rights of a group of people whose orientation does not run along the conventional or traditional mode. The issue was simplistically reduced to a moral dimension, a matter of right or wrong.

The sticking point is the word "marriage." Because the institution has been there for thousands of years marking the sacred union between man and woman, the very idea of, let alone a bill for, "same-sex marriage" is just mind-blowing for much of humanity! How can this be, people ask. Not only is it an oxymoron; it's going against God's will. And so on. Even if the word was replaced with something like "partnership," it would still be unacceptable to the opponents of the issue.

So fired up were some quarters that even some of Grauly's campaign materials or posters were defaced to make him look like a champion of gay people! His views were distorted or misrepresented. Speaking of dirty tricks and all the innuendoes that the politics of vi-

sciousness can generate. One pays a very high price for public life. Even higher for views or positions one takes on issues that are out of the ordinary. People are shocked out of their seats.

Exacerbating the situation for Grauly was his position on the equally controversial and tough issue of gun control. Again, the message here about wanting to prevent more violence in society with tougher gun control measures was lost in the brouhaha over the use of unconventional campaign material by Grauly. Yes, that was a mistake, a miscalculation. But like all mortals, politicians also commit mistakes. We demand perfection or near perfection from our public officials. I'm not making a case for making mistakes, but it does happen.

In the end, however, it was the same-sex issue that did him in. It erased all the good things he had done as a legislator.

Grauly has indicated that his defeat marks the end of his political career. It's too bad that we have lost a state legislator of substance. He is a bright, articulate, and competent individual whose talents and energy have served the

legislature very well in these rapidly changing times. I hope he still pursues a vigorous public career in some non-elective capacity. He was a good legislator and his advocacy of liberal and progressive values will be remembered in the annals of Hawai'i politics.

His defeat may be humbling, but in the long run, he and his supporters can take comfort in the fact that he followed what he thought was right. He did things on principle rather than expediency. And that he had the courage of his convictions to carry it out. In the larger sense, transcending politics as a whole, he left a great legacy behind.

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