

Jackie Washington: Fighting for minority's rights

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By Cornelius A. Fortune

Jackie Washington has one goal and one goal only: to fight for minority's rights, including those of the LGBT community.

"I'm a very strong supporter of the issues of that community, and in fact, with the ACLU we have a very strong program in defense of the LGBT community," she says. "The ACLU is the premiere organization that litigates on those issues."

Washington is executive vice president of the ACLU Fund of Michigan, and is on the board of governors at Wayne State University. She retired from her position as president/CEO of Planned Parenthood of Southeast Michigan in 1999. Since then, she has continued to fight the fight of equality, with verve and a whole lot of determination.

"I am very strong about systems change (where people are being oppressed), trying to make a difference, and trying to do things that are going to change and make things better," she says. "The ACLU continues to fight that battle. At Wayne State I think our issues there are every wide-ranging."

Her position at Wayne State is elected every eight years. She's currently in her sixth year.

Washington points out that the school is extremely progressive on human rights issues, particularly on an issue whose wider implications are still on the table: Proposal 2, the anti-gay marriage amendment passed by Michigan voters in 2004.

"An issue that was very important to me was Proposal 2," she says. "Wayne State wanted to ensure that there were partner benefits because we see that as a way of attracting talented people to our university."

Partner benefits are still an important issue, notes Washington. "We're an advocate for maintaining domestic partner benefits," she says. "We feel we have a right to continue to provide those benefits regardless of what has happened – we may be challenged on that, but we have the right to provide that kind of benefit to our faculty."

The upcoming battle over affirmative action is also part of this year's agenda, and she has a unique take on the argument.

"I think that lesbians have quite a bit of discrimination already, and [the affirmative action ban] will make it even more difficult for them," she says. "The issues of Affirmative Action are vitally important. [It will affect] jobs, outreach programs for

women, and women who want to be in business. It's important for all segments of the community to be aware of how wide-ranging the implications are should the affirmative action ban be implemented."

Washington was the first African-American elected to serve as president of the national NOW-Legal Defense and Education Fund, which litigates on issues related to discrimination against women in employment and education, and was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame for her advocacy on behalf of women.

"I'm in a position to ensure there is equality in the LGBT community, whether it is higher education – with the domestic partner benefits – or in the ACLU, where we vote on cases that defend members of that community. So in those two ways I'm very, very supportive in the LGBT community – my vote does make a difference."

Perception for most is reality. So how much of a difference can a board governor of a university make?

"I think sometimes people underestimate how much a person on a governing board can do for specific communities," she says. "We can be supportive, we can make changes, we can inquire about hiring practices, we can make sure that we have a representative number, and we are really interested in making sure that Wayne State is an equal opportunity employer, and an equal opportunity educator."

Looking back on her career, she never thought she'd be an activist.

"Before I went to the school of social work I was very neutral on a lot of issues," she says. "After a couple of years in that program, I became quite radicalized, because it made me aware of just how much injustice there was."