

# OUT LOUD

## JOE SOLMONESE IS THE PUBLIC FACE FOR GAY RIGHTS IN AMERICA

**JOE SOLMONESE** was an undergraduate at Boston University in the mid 1980s the first time he heard about AIDS. “I was sitting in my room on Bay State Road, flipping through an issue of *Time* magazine, and there was an article about this supposed gay cancer,” he recalls.

By the time he graduated, AIDS had become a full-blown epidemic, and thousands of gay men and women were taking to the streets to raise awareness of the disease. But Solmonese (COM’87), then closeted, was not among them. “Back then, very few of us were open about who we were,” he says. “We were afraid to be out.”

Today, Solmonese is about as out as can be. As president of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation’s largest political network for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) equality in the United States, he is at the forefront of the gay rights movement. In the past year alone, he has appeared on national television to question Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama on the issue of marriage equality, hosted a weekly GLBT-themed show on XM Satellite Radio, and gone head-to-head (while maintaining his cool) with Stephen Colbert on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*.

Solmonese traces his interest in politics to his senior year at BU, when he landed an internship in the scheduling office of Michael Dukakis, then governor of Massachusetts. He later campaigned for Barney Frank during the Bay State Democrat’s 1990 congressional bid.

“It exposed me to politics in a very powerful way, sparking something inside of me,” he recalls.

His journey from an insecure young man to a national gay spokesperson was more gradual. “After graduation, I did some volunteering for the AIDS Action Committee” he says, “and I participated in the AIDS Walk and Pride, because it was a way to meet people in Boston’s GLBT community.” But coming out during the height of the AIDS epidemic was not easy. “It compounded everything,” he says.

Today, Solmonese’s easygoing smile, dry wit, and soft-spoken manner do not hide his firm resolve to fight for the cause he’s passionate about. “How can I not be an activist?” he asks. “The American experience for members of my community is not what it should be, and until it is, I’ll strive for equality.” As HRC president, Solmonese lobbies politicians on Capitol Hill and travels across the country to speak on matters of social justice, marriage equality, health-care benefits, and hate crime legislation.

With more than 700,000 members nationwide, the Washington, D.C.–based HRC has an annual budget of \$130 million. “In the past few years, we’ve transitioned from a largely defensive movement to a very proactive one that successfully mobilized voters to put a record number of fair-minded people into office in 2006,” Solmonese says.

“I predict that in another twenty years,” he says, “members of the GLBT community are going to be in a very good place, particularly when you consider we’ve only been in a formalized movement for forty years. Compared to other civil rights struggles in this country, we’re moving at lightning speed.” **VICKY WALTZ**



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

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