# It’s Not Over

Michelangelo Signorile and Dan Savage discuss LGBT issues beyond marriage equality, including HIV/AIDS.

August 11, 2015 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

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Michelangelo Signorile

Dan Savage

I had the privilege of moderating a conversation earlier this year between activists and authors Michelangelo Signorile and Dan Savage. The talk was engaging (if I do say so myself, but others have told me the same!), which was not unexpected. After all, both men have been at the forefront of LGBT issues for decades.

The event was co-hosted by the New York chapter of NLGJA: The Association of LGBT Journalists and its student chapter at the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism. Full disclosure: I’m a longtime member of NLGJA, so many thanks to them for the opportunity.

The conversation was prompted by the publication of Signorile’s latest book, It’s Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality. We explored the premise of the book (extremely brief summary: “victory blindness” is dangerous), as well as the themes in Savage’s most recent book, American Savage: Insights, Slights, and Fights on Faith, Sex, Love, and Politics.

We discussed fighting for full civil rights for LGBTs, challenging media coverage and confronting deep-seated homophobia, as well as how HIV interrupts the victory narrative. Below are edited excerpts from the event.

I’m going to quote Mike’s book: “It’s not over…. There’s a disconnect between the way we talk about the strides forward and the reality on the ground. This narrowing of scope to talk only about successes—that’s victory blindness. And just as often happened in the battles against other forms of bigotry in which groups that thought they had ‘arrived,’ only to see rights stripped away, sometimes decades later, the enemies of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans will capitalize on it. We’ve got to pay attention now perhaps more than ever before as equality’s opponents gather their forces.”

So “victory blindness” leads to backlash, which you argue threatens the gains of the LGBT movement. As an example of victory blindness and its consequences, you cite the resignation of Brendan Eich, inventor

of Javascript and CEO of Mozilla, the maker of Firefox. Mike, can you elaborate on that?

Signorile: I use the story in the first chapter of the book about Brendan Eich as one example of this idea of victory blindness.

We've been people who've been horribly demonized and went through horrendous experiences—including intolerance and complete ignorance during the height of the AIDS epidemic, which decimated us—that when we have these wins, it's captivating. There's then an impulse we all can feel to believe [the discrimination is] all over.

Brendan Eich gave money to Proposition 8 [the ballot initiative that made same-sex marriage illegal in California]. When [his donation] was revealed in 2012, there was a little bit of an uproar, but not until he was made CEO in 2014 was there much more of a concern.

Rarebit, owned by two gay men, asked Eich if he felt sorry for giving this money and he said no. They decided they weren't going to do business with him anymore.

Then OKCupid did it and others did it. This was all the free market in operation. No gay activists called for him to step down, but the right wing spun it into that.

My feeling was that too many LGBT people instead of hitting back at that [right wing] backlash were saying, "We shouldn't have [let him lose his job]," or "We shouldn't be applauding this," or "We should be magnanimous," or "We should be reaching out."

Our opinion-makers collapsed, and this man gave money to other anti-gay candidates. If he were anti-Semitic and had given money to an anti-Semitic candidate or a racist candidate, he would not have been acceptable. We need to make that argument.

To paraphrase the premise, it's no longer just about tolerating LGBT people anymore—we have to fully accept them. What social justice issues surface during this ongoing battle?

Savage: We can tick off issues: LGBT elders—the Stonewall generation, the survivors of the plague—being forced back into the closet in nursing homes; LGBT youth homelessness; violence directed at trans women.

It's important to emphasize that victory blindness doesn't mean we've had no victories, but we don't want to walk off the field. We can't be complacent because things can be rolled back. We still have to fight.

Signorile: I talk a lot in the book about how the enemies of LGBT rights are trying out all kinds of things. Every time we think they went away, they have another win that's under the radar. They depend on the media not paying attention; they depend on big business sitting this one out.

That's true on the political end, but we also have to be aware of the backlash for more marginalized parts of our communities. Take the record numbers of LGBT homeless youth that we're seeing. Kids think, "I can come out now," but then their parents are still religious bigots and throw them out of the house. The victories create further issues we have to deal with.

Dan, since we're on the subject of kids, tell us about your TV show.

Savage: This ABC sitcom, for which I am one of eight executive producers and I am not writing, is about a queer kid in a family where the parents are divorcing and he comes out in the midst of that, which is kind of my coming out.

This kid is coming out to homophobic parents. I'm advocating for that to be a complicated story, not just another slap of the rainbow windsock, because I don't think TV needs that. That's what I'm hoping for.

Back to victory blindness, where does HIV/AIDS fit in?

Signorile: We still have high infection rates. We have HIV criminalization laws that have criminalized hundreds of people. That's all happening under the radar and not really discussed.

[LGBTs] have these fights about PrEP [pre-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV] when we should be fighting with the federal health establishment, which is not making PrEP or PEP [post-exposure prophylaxis] available to those who need to get it.

We also still haven't had an explicit sex education campaign around HIV since the beginning of the epidemic. It's extraordinary.

For LGBT groups that are just about showing great victories, HIV complicates the whole thing. It doesn't fit the victory narrative.

Worse than that, it then plays out in culture: For all of these LGBT characters on TV, HIV doesn't exist. But it does in the lives of LGBT Americans. Looking [on HBO] finally got there in the second season, and then it was canceled.

HIV in films is about what happened decades ago, like Dallas Buyers Club. It's not about what's happening now.

Where do we go from here?

Savage: Movements have to push at the weak spots, secure and take ground, achieve something, try to nail it down, and then go into the never-ending rear-guard action defense to hold that.

Signorile: We need to demand a full and comprehensive civil rights bill. If we had never stopped demanding it, back when it was introduced decades ago, it wouldn't seem like we're asking for a lot now.

Instead we went for this strategy of, "Let's ask for this little bit." It telegraphs to the other side that you don't care that much if you're just asking for a little bit. It'll take a long time, but look at what we've done. Let's demand it all.

Go to bit.ly/signorilesavage to watch the complete conversation on POZ.com.

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