

PRESIDENT'S 2008 STATE OF THE "UNION"

JEANNE BAKER, PRESIDENT

What a tremendous year it has been here in Florida.

We had a momentous presidential election in which, for the first time since 2000, our voting machines and procedures did not fail us; and for the first time ever Florida voters, along with the great majority of Americans, demonstrated their ability to move beyond the racial divide of the past and elect an African-American as President.

We also won significant court battles in the past year – including overturning Florida's unconstitutional "travel ban" law; striking down Orlando's unconstitutional ordinance prohibiting religious and other groups from feeding groups of homeless persons downtown; granting of adoption of two children to a gay man in Miami; protecting free speech for students in a rural Panhandle high school; protecting the rights of petition-gatherers in Fort Myers; protecting students' rights to form a Gay-Straight Alliance in Okeechobee; and, working with like-minded organizations, succeeding in blocking two proposed state constitutional amendments – Amendments 7 & 9, which would have breached the separation of church and state – from the November ballot.

However, sadly, all of this momentum and excitement are tempered by the devastating blow to civil liberties by the passage of Amendment 2 – the so-called "marriage amendment" that not only enshrines in our State Constitution an existing legal prohibition against same-sex marriage but also jeopardizes domestic partnerships, medical and other benefits, and the right of seniors to make medical decisions for loved ones, regardless of gender. Our work is cut out for us on these critical issues: indeed, we are already formulating ways to roll back the heinous consequences of Amendment 2 and continue advancing equality for everyone in Florida.

There are many other contentious issues on the horizon that require our vigilance. Although the administration in Washington, D.C. is changing, the need for vigorous programs to protect civil liberties at the national, state and local levels has not changed. We face a vast array of civil liberties violations perpetrated by the past administration which President-elect Obama's administration may not be willing to reverse without a fight. And, here in Florida, there is no "may" about it; we will have to fight against continued attacks on free speech, reproductive freedom, LGBT rights, as well as voting rights policies that persist to disfranchise many thousands of Floridians.

To accomplish the civil liberties work that faces us in Florida, we have continued to build a truly statewide organization. This past year, we fully staffed our projects, regional offices, legal and communications offices and built a new public policy department to help shape the vision of the ACLU's work in Florida. We added our first-ever Associate Legal Director to assist in

managing our legal infrastructure, help develop new cases and recruit volunteer attorneys to work with staff to advance civil liberties through litigation. We expanded our LGBT Advocacy project by adding an attorney in Tampa, and hired our first-ever Director of our Northeast Regional Office. In a team effort by the Public Education Committee of the State Board and the Communications staff, a Student Rights DVD was produced that has been well received in public schools in Florida and across the nation, and was recently used to prep a large group of lawyers and judges in San Diego before they talked with high school students about the Constitution and Bill of Rights on Constitution Day.

Establishing regional offices across the state has truly enabled us to reach out to communities and people who have never seen or heard from the ACLU. It has also made it possible for our numerous volunteer chapters to more efficiently execute programming at the local level and be the eyes, ears and voice of the ACLU in communities from Key West to Palm Bay, from Naples to St. Augustine, and all the way west across the Florida Panhandle.

On the national level, we have a new president of the national ACLU Board – Susan Herman – who steps in after the departure of Nadine Strossen. Nadine was the longest-serving president in the ACLU's history, and had a galvanizing impact on our work. However, while we will miss Nadine, we are very excited about Susan's future tenure. She is a professor of law at Brooklyn School of Law, specializing in constitutional law with expertise in the due process rights of prisoners, the Patriot Act, the Fourth Amendment, socioeconomic rights and equality, and the First Amendment. Susan brings a wealth of knowledge and leadership in areas in which the ACLU faces great challenges on the national level, especially as Washington must struggle with the legacy of Guantanamo and other liberty-destroying initiatives of the past administration.

Florida is an integral part of what has been a tremendous ACLU growth spurt nationwide. This growth is not a one, two or five-year plan; rather, we are building the foundation for the ACLU of the future. In Florida, this growth could not have been achieved without the financial support of our devoted supporters and the hard work and dedication of our staff under the direction of our indefatigable Executive Director, Howard Simon.

To help sustain and build on this growth, we have joined the nationwide ACLU *Leading Freedom Forward* Campaign. The rapid expansion we have experienced needs a backbone to support it in the years and decades to come. It is imperative that we, along with our friends and supporters, guarantee our freedoms in the future by planning for it today. I am proud to be part of this extraordinary organization and thank each and every one of you for your unyielding dedication to our core values and principles.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jeanne Baker". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jeanne Baker, President
American Civil Liberties Union of Florida