

NEWS

Moving the Message Forward

GLAAD CEO celebrates
40 years of fighting
for LGBTQ+ inclusion



Sarah Kate Ellis, President & CEO of GLAAD speaks during the 36th Annual GLAAD Media Awards on March 27 in Beverly Hills, California.
MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES FOR GLAAD

By Matt Alderton

Advocacy group GLAAD's 2024 annual edition of the "Accelerating Acceptance" report found that 89% of non-LGBTQ+ adults believe LGBTQ+ people deserve to live lives free of discrimination, with 80% saying they support equal rights for LGBTQ+ Americans. When The Hollywood Reporter asked Americans in 2015 if they supported same-sex marriage, 31% said they'd become more supportive during the preceding decade. Of those, 27% credited their evolution to portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters on popular shows like ABC's "Modern Family" and Fox's "Glee." GLAAD is a major reason those characters exist. **CONTINUED >>**

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Established in 1985 as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, its mission is advancing LGBTQ+ acceptance by ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of LGBTQ+ people in media, including TV, film, journalism, gaming and more. In honor of the organization's 40th anniversary, President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis spoke about GLAAD's achievements, impact and future.

Q A lot has changed in 40 years, both in the LGBTQ+ community and in media. Is GLAAD still relevant?

ELLIS: GLAAD was founded 40 years ago during the AIDS crisis because our founders understood two things that were happening. One: Stories in the media were defaming our community — especially gay men. Two: You can't hate who you know. So, they founded GLAAD to be a watchdog to hold journalism and media accountable and to lobby Hollywood to tell our stories.

You can't move policy and law until you move culture. What's so different today is that media is now all-consuming. The average American spends more time every day on media than they do eating, sleeping and working combined. Because of that, our importance as an organization has grown dramatically.

As you reflect on the last 40 years, which of GLAAD's achievements stand out as being the most significant?

From Ellen DeGeneres coming out on her sitcom in 1997 (which GLAAD supported by rallying support in the face of right-wing pressure on ABC not to air that specific episode) to "Will and Grace" (GLAAD worked closely with the show's creators on certain episodes), we've had many watershed moments. I'm very proud of those moments because they took our movement and accelerated it in a powerful way. Nothing else can accomplish change like people who have huge followings who are willing to shift the culture and do it at their own peril. Our campaign around marriage equality stands out because it moved the narrative from "equality" to "love." That was probably one of our most significant contributions to the community.

The work we're doing now is significant because there are so many words and ideas being weaponized against our community. We have to think about what's at stake and how we can communicate that.

What challenges are GLAAD facing right now?

The media landscape has changed dramatically. It's important to understand what shifts there have been so we can move our team into those spaces. Everything from podcasts to video games is now a part of the work we do, and I think it's time we lean into those spaces like never before.

Second is the audience. We talk about the "movable middle" — folks who are good on some LGBTQ+



"Will and Grace" was the first network TV show to feature LGBTQ+ leading characters. CHRIS HASTON/NBC



An activist wearing a rainbow flag stands in front of the White House lit with rainbow colors in Washington D.C. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

issues and not great on others. We need to focus on building true and authentic connections with those people. Third is messaging. DEI has been weaponized against our community even though it's part of the fabric of this country. We need to get that narrative back in a positive way.

At the heart of GLAAD is storytelling. What stories are you interested in telling right now?

One is kids and family. I'm married to a woman

and we have two kids. Whether it's on Disney or in their classroom, they see straight stories every day, and I think they should see reflections of their own family.

There aren't enough stories out there for trans folks and gender-nonconforming people. Only 30% of Americans say they know someone who's trans. The other 70% are learning about trans people through media, which right now is all about attacking trans people. We need to introduce the world to trans people the same way "Will and Grace" introduced the world to gay people. We need something on TV where you can laugh with trans people and cry with them. That would be such a powerful tool to bring people together instead of dividing them.

What are your priorities for GLAAD as you contemplate its next 40 years?

One is making sure we create opportunities for our community to come together. The second is that we as an organization are focused on closing the gap in this media ecosystem. When you look at an analysis of media, the right-wing media reaches 100 million people a week, and the progressive media reaches 30 million people a week. That 70 million-person gap is where most of Middle America lives, and they aren't hearing our stories.