
EXPLANATION: Jose Antonio Vargas has courageously, and at great personal risk, stepped forward to give voice to the millions of Americans that live on the margins of society as undocumented persons. In so doing, and through his work, he has been a shining example of strength, pride, and hope for a community in desperate need of all three.

Mary Bonauto has been a principle architect, often at the helm, of nearly every major legal victory leading to full marriage equality for same-sex couples in the United States. In this way, she has spent her life as a “fierce advocate for justice” in one of the greatest civil rights struggle of the current age.
Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, a filmmaker, and an activist who is best known for his work in advocating for immigration reform. In 2011, he wrote an essay for the New York Times magazine where he disclosed his undocumented immigration status. This essay jumpstarted a national conversation and increased media awareness on the experiences of the more than 11 million undocumented Americans living in the United States.

After graduating from San Francisco State University, Vargas began working for the Philadelphia Daily News, then moved to the San Francisco Chronicle, and eventually to the Washington Post. He was part of the news team who covered the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, the assignment that earned him the Pulitzer Prize. He eventually became a Senior Contributing Editor for the Huffington Post. After writing his NYT essay in 2011, Jose founded the organization Define American, a nonprofit group that advocates for immigration reform, promotes the rights of undocumented people, and increases awareness of how systemic racism dictates immigration policies and public opinions.

Since 2011, Jose has continued to educate the general public on immigration issues through speaking tours, media appearances, and public essays. He was featured on news programs like MSNBC’s The Rachel Maddow Show, CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360, and Fox News’s The O’Reilly Factor. In June 2012, he appeared on the cover of TIME magazine with other undocumented immigrants; it was the first time an openly undocumented American had been on the cover of TIME.

A year later, Vargas transformed his life story into the movie Documented, which was released in theaters in 2013 and was broadcast on CNN on Independence Day 2014. The film was praised widely, including being nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Documentary, as well as awards at the Hawaii International Film Festival and the San Diego Asian Film Festival. Vargas’s second documentary film, White People, has expanded his focus to race relations generally and challenges ordinary white Americans to reflect on how the scourge of institutional racism harms society as a whole.

Through it all, Jose Antonio Vargas has remained a “fierce advocate for justice,” particularly for undocumented immigrants, a community that is currently being specifically targeted for enforcement and deportation. Many in the John Jay and CUNY community have immediate family members that are undocumented or are undocumented themselves. Awarding an honorary doctorate will send a clear and public message to these members of our community that they are valued and welcome at CUNY.
MARY BONAUTO

Over the last fifteen years, gay and lesbian Americans have fought and won many important legal victories toward full marriage and family equality. Every step of the way, Mary Bonauto has led the charge. Through her tireless advocacy and unmatched skills in the courtroom, Bonauto has been the principle legal architect of marriage equality in the United States, and a hero to its millions of beneficiaries.

Bonauto entered adulthood in a nation that, like nearly all others at that time, criminalized, harassed, and imprisoned homosexual persons and others whose gender expression and/or sexual orientation did not conform to culturally dominant norms. The newest generation of LGBT Americans, on the other hand, are entering adulthood in a state of historically unprecedented legal acceptance and equality. Though work remains to be done, and this newfound freedom is still young and fragile, there is no individual to whom more credit is due for this newfound freedom than Mary Bonauto.

Bonauto's advocacy for Gays and Lesbians began in 1990 when she became the chief litigator for the then-fledgling organization Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, or GLAD. By 1999, she led the legal team that won the first major battle for gay marriage rights in Baker v. Vermont, which became the touchstone of the marriage equality movement in the US. GLAD and Bonauto were again at the helm of the legal team whose victory led to the first full-fledged same-sex marriages in the United States in Goodridge v. Massachusetts Department of Public Health in 2003. She led GLAD to a similar legal victory in Connecticut and, after more state challenges began to find success, she turned her eyes toward the federal recognition of same-sex marriage.

Legal challenges won by GLAD, under Bonauto's leadership, were eventually merged with other cases that led to the United States v. Windsor decision striking down the most harmful components of the Defense of Marriage Act (or DOMA), a case for which she coordinated many of the amici briefs on behalf of marriage equality advocates.

Bonauto's legal leadership of the marriage equality movement was made most apparent by her being chosen as lead counsel for the oral arguments in Obergefell v. Hodges. Bonauto won that case on behalf of the millions of Americans she fought for, and full marriage equality became the law of the land in the United States in 2015.

Every civil rights movement has its heroes and Mary Bonauto is the most deserving of that title for the LGBT civil rights movement. Her life's work has ensured for her a proud place in the history of this nation.