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Activists get support for rights law

by David Jones
Q-Notes Staff

ORANGE COUNTY, NC—After a public hearing on March 2, 1994, the Chapel Hill Town Council voted unanimously to ask the Orange County Commissioners to include gay people in the county's proposed civil rights ordinance. The Carrboro Board of Aldermen also discussed the matter and voted to hold a public hearing on May 3.

Orange County Commissioners obtained authorization from the General Assembly in 1991 to adopt a civil rights ordinance. The Commissioners initially included sexual orientation in the proposed ordinance, but it was taken out on the recommendation of Senator Howard Lee, Democrat from Chapel Hill, because of opposition

in the legislature. As written, the ordinance would apply to all unincorporated portions of Orange County. The towns of Hillsborough, Chapel Hill and Carrboro would be included only if their governments adopt a resolution endorsing the ordinance.

The Orange Lesbian and Gay Alliance (OLGA) has taken the position that the ordinance should be adopted by commissioners and cities as-is, and an effort made later to enact legislation to include gay people. In OLGA discussions, some activists reportedly took the position that adoption should be delayed until gays and lesbians are included because, they argued, the legislature is unlikely to support a separate bill that offers protection only to gay people.

OLGA endorsed the ordinance as-is before the Chapel Hill Town Council public hearing but urged the council to request that county commissioners seek legislation to add gays and lesbians. The council did so without dissent.

Neighboring Carrboro has not taken a position formally, and will do so after its public hearing. However, in deciding on March 8 to proceed with a hearing, two members of the board spoke forcefully for the need to include gay people. Mike Nelson, an openly-gay alderman, said he would have a hard time voting for a civil rights ordinance that did not protect him and other gay people. Board member Jackie Gist said that not including gays and lesbians would send a message that "it's OK to beat them up." She said that the current proposal does not protect some of her best friends and two of her relatives.

Hillsborough had not scheduled a discussion of the ordinance at press time. Commissioners have said that they will wait until the towns have considered the ordinance before deciding how to proceed.

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Dr. Mel White to speak at SC Pride

by John Scruggs
Special to Q-Notes

"I'm fighting to help the Religious Right save their souls," says Dr. Mel White, dean of MCC's Cathedral of Hope. "On the day of judgement, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and the whole Religious Right will be condemned for leaving us at the gate."

White should know what he's talking about. For years, he was a ghost-writer for some of the Religious Right's icons, including Robertson and Falwell. That all changed when he came out as a gay man.

White will be the featured speaker at South Carolina's Gay and Lesbian Pride Rally on April 16, 1994 in Columbia, SC.

The analogy of being left at the gate comes directly from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, as does the title of his new book, *Strangers At The Gate: To Be Gay And Christian In America*. When speaking of Sodom and Gomorrah, White is quick to point out that homosexuality has no place in the story. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, says White, was "rejecting the strangers at the gate." In America today, White points out the Religious Right as being the true sodomites.

To White, the way gays and lesbians have been treated by the church is nothing short of evil. Understanding why so many have left the church, White encourages gays and lesbians not to give up on their spirituality. "I'm not saying my way is the only way," says White, who cautions people not to use their own faith as a criteria to judge others. As opposed to his foes on the Religious Right, White encourages people to explore their spirituality, no matter what shape it takes.

With his book, White is launching a direct attack on the fundamentalist Right. He points to the ex-gay movements and reparative therapies offered by fundamentalists as a great danger. "They're offering false hope," says White, "and false hope is worse than no hope at all." White sees this as a terrible wrong, because lives are being lost.

Throughout his years as an author, jour-

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Lesbians charged with sexual abuse Couple may be victims of child custody battle

by David Stout
Q-Notes Staff

LEXINGTON, NC—A lesbian mother and her lover say that a vicious custody battle with their daughter's maternal grandmother, Elaine Vanzant, stems from Vanzant's disapproval of their relationship and has caused them to be wrongfully charged with sexual abuse.

The mother of the two-year-old girl, Shirley Edwards, 25, and her lover of seven months, Donna Madren, 34, claim that the sexual abuse charges leveled against them are Vanzant's cruel and malicious way of wresting control of the child from them and removing her from their "unfit" home.

They claim that on January 11, 1994, Lexington police officers entered their home and arrested them for first-degree sexual offenses after Edward's mother had the girl's babysitter file charges against them.

According to a Department of Social Services (DSS) document, the charges arise from the toddler's alleged disclosure to the babysitter that the women "kiss her 'kitty cat' and [have bitten] her on the leg."

On the same day that Edwards and Madren were arrested, the girl was given a standard medical examination by a local physician looking for signs of sexual abuse. No evidence to substantiate sexual abuse was found, but the doctor did note some healing bruises. Madren attributed them to falls which she said was normal for any toddler.

After nearly a month, family members were able to post bond and have Madren released while she awaits trial. But, Edwards has been imprisoned since her arrest, unable to raise the money necessary to meet her \$75,000.00 bail.

DSS requested that the girl be placed in foster care until the sexual abuse allegations could be resolved, to protect her from the custody battle between her mother and grandmother. But, the judge failed to heed the recommendation and placed the child with Vanzant.

Madren said that the problems began as soon as Edwards told her mother that she was

a lesbian last fall, "She [Vanzant] said that Shirley could give her daughter to her or she could live a normal lifestyle."

Martha Gurley works with Madren at Grins, Giggles and Laughs, a balloon shop in Lexington, and says that she knows too well the financial and emotional strain this situation has placed on her friend. "We do lots of work for kids — birthday parties and things like that — so you can imagine what these charges of sexual abuse have done to our business. We have lost almost all of our customers over this."

What troubles Gurley even more than the financial devastation though, is the homophobic injustice she says she sees in it all. "When all of this mess first started, I was being accused of sexual abuse just like Donna and Shirley were, but then, when it got out that I was straight, all of a sudden I wasn't involved anymore."

Gurley says that she has come to fully realize the level of institutionalized hatred for gays that exists in the Lexington bureaucracy. "We were not able to get a lawyer in town to take Shirley's case, the police wouldn't give us any assistance, we were totally on our own until you all [the media] got involved."

Madren also feels victimized by the system, and alleges that she was harassed by two police officers. "We had a sign in front of the shop that said 'Free Shirley Edwards' and two policemen came by and said that if we didn't take the sign down, Shirley's bail wouldn't be reduced and we wouldn't be able to get her out."

Madren was unable to identify the officers and calls to the Lexington Police Department yielded only vehement denials. Captain Barber, of the detective division, said that he did not believe the conversation took place and the only information he did have concerning Shirley Edwards was that her trial date was still pending.

Madren is being represented by a local

attorney and Edwards case is being handled by attorney Jeffrey Koenig of Charlotte. He was retained for this case by Mark Barkley, the NC state organizer for the new gay and lesbian activist organization Gay and Lesbian Americans.

Koenig's first task is to get Edwards' bail reduced from the "outrageous" amount that it is now. Then he must prove that this whole situation is the creation of a homophobic mother who can't bear the thought that her daughter is a lesbian.

Should the state manage to make the charges of felony sexual abuse stand up, both women face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

Nominations sought for annual Q-Notes awards

CHARLOTTE—Nominations are currently being accepted for this year's Q-Notes OUT!Bound Award and Mark Drum Memorial Award, to be presented by Q-Notes at North Carolina Lesbian and Gay Pride 1994. This year will be the third time the annual awards have been presented.

The Mark Drum Memorial Award is given to recognize an individual who has done outstanding and exceptional work in the HIV/AIDS-affected community.

Mark Drum was a Q-Notes staff writer who chronicled his battle with the disease until his passing in May of 1991. We are honored to pay tribute to Mark and feel this award is our appreciation in action.

The Q-Notes OUT!Bound Award is presented to someone who has made a significant impact on the lesbian and gay community in North and/or South Carolina. This person will have made a viable change through activism, lobbying, and community service.

If you or your community service orga-

nization know a person who should be considered for either prize, please write to us. Include in your letter a brief personal profile of the individual; a description of their work and performance; and the reasons why their contribution has been exceptional.

We are aware that hundreds of people in the gay and lesbian community are committed every day to extinguishing disease; suffering; bigotry; bashing; and discrimination, so choosing these recipients will be a difficult process.

The deadline for your submission is Sunday, May 15.

All applications will be given serious consideration by a nominating committee; finalists will be voted on by the entire staff.

Please make sure that you include your contact information, as we will be making further inquiry regarding finalists.

Send your submissions to Q-Notes, P.O. Box 221841, Charlotte, NC 28222.