

North Carolina Pride
June 3-5

25 Years

PRIDE

June 1969 - June 1994

Stonewall New York
June 23-28

Notes

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weekend

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Over a dozen out lesbians attended the first state-wide conference on breast cancer determined to make lesbian issues a part of the on-going debate on women's health care.



Photo by Dierdre Shesgreen courtesy of The Independent

Lesbians advocate culturally competent outreach at NC breast cancer summit

by David Jones
Q-Notes Staff

WINSTON-SALEM—A van pulled into the parking lot of the Hawthorne Conference Center in Winston-Salem on April 29, 1994 with a dozen "out" lesbians from the Triangle area on a mission: to do something about breast cancer. It was the first statewide conference on breast cancer, and these women, along with about 20 other lesbians both in and out of the closet, made their presence known and added their issues to the discussion.

"It was a fabulous group of women," says Bernadette Carr, a lesbian activist and business owner and board member of the Durham-based North Carolina Lesbian and Gay Health Project (LGHP). "We were black, white and Latino, poor and not, older and younger, you name it. And they knew that we were there. Six of the eight main speakers mentioned the 'L-word' and lesbians were on two of the five panels."

Lucy Harris of the LGHP staff participated in a panel discussion of advocacy and Liza Rankow, an LGHP member and Duke Physician Associate, spoke on outreach. LGHP prepared written material on lesbians and breast cancer for the packets given to the 300 people who attended the conference.

The highly visible lesbian role did not happen by accident. Rankow attended a national roundtable discussion of lesbian health issues in Washington, DC in February 1994 following a meeting of lesbian health activists with the new Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala, in April of 1993. "The Clinton administration is opening up to lesbian health issues and we are getting more attention," she reports, "particularly through new offices of women's health issues that have been created in several federal health agencies." The North Carolina Conference was co-sponsored by the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health. The relationship that Rankow and

others had established in Washington helped to open the door when she, Harris and others began working to get lesbian issues and speakers on the agenda of the North Carolina conference.

In 1994, 46,000 women will die of breast cancer and 182,000 new cases will be diagnosed. Some 385,000 people in the U.S. are expected to have died of complications of AIDS by 1995; over 400,000 U.S. women have died of breast cancer in the past decade. It strikes 1 in 8 women today, up from 1 in 14 in 1960.

A family history of breast cancer and age (rates rise dramatically after age 50) are associated with a higher incidence. Some studies on risk conflict with others. Breast cancer has long been associated with high levels of fat in the diet, but one study suggests that it is the high consumption of soy-based foods that lowers risk, not animal fat that increases it (which could explain lower rates of breast cancer among women in Japan). Studies have associated breast cancer with exposure to industrial chemicals and pesticides. Others question those conclusions.

Lesbians have a special interest in breast cancer. At least one report says that the incidence in lesbians may be as high as 1 in 3. If so, the reasons are not well understood. Never having children or delaying the first childbirth until after the age of 30, is associated with an increased incidence of breast cancer. Some data also suggest that lesbians consume more alcohol and cigarettes than average, according to LGHP, which can increase the risks of all cancers.

But LGHP and activists nationally are quick to point out that adequate research has not been done to measure the incidence of breast cancer in lesbians and the factors associated with it. Those studies that have been done tend to focus on women who are younger, white and who self-identify as lesbians and

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Change in federal civil rights strategy brings hopes, perils

by Bob Roehr
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—The "glass" of federal civil rights legislation for gays and lesbians can be seen as either half full or half empty.

Optimists point to the imminent appearance of a draft bill covering employment protection as the first piece of such legislation which has a legitimate chance of being enacted into law.

Pessimists point to deficiencies and delays in drafting the bill, building coalitions, and creating support mechanisms to achieve passage.

Both are right.

After months of discussions among themselves and with their allies, but with little public debate within the community, national gay and lesbian legal and political leaders have made a strategic decision to push for employment protection as the first piece of federal gay and lesbian civil rights legislation.

A broad, omnibus federal gay and lesbian civil rights bill has continuously been introduced in Congress since 1974 but has gone nowhere.

Eric Rosenthal is political director for the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF). He said the decision not to push for an omnibus bill but to divide coverage into a number of bills and lead with employment was driven by three factors.

One is a survey on personal employment practices by members of Congress being con-

ducted by HRCF. In February the group announced that more than half the members of the House of Representatives had signed on, saying they do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in hiring for their personal staffs. HRCF expects to make a similar announcement concerning the Senate within the next few weeks.

A second is polling and focus group data that shows a strong majority of Americans (about 3 out of 4 in most surveys) opposed the anti-gay discrimination in employment. The data is more ambivalent on discrimination in other areas.

A third is the fact that "most of the compelling examples (of discrimination) that we have been able to find are employment examples," Rosenthal said.

Tanya Domi, legislative director at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) concurs with the strategic decision. She personally reached that conclusion last fall. She views the six month process of reaching consensus among members of the coalition as strengthening the effort.

"My preference is for separate bills with regard to housing and public accommodations," said openly gay Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), "I don't think you treat sexual orientation any differently than you treat race or gender."

Frank does see employment very differently, particularly when it comes to affirmative action. "I think affirmative action is a very relevant remedy for past discrimination

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PAC candidates fare well

by Dan Van Mourik
Q-Notes Staff

RALEIGH—The NC Pride PAC for Lesbian and Gay Equality endorsed 38 candidates in the May 3 primary elections, a record number for the three-year-old political action committee. In addition to publicizing their endorsements, the group distributed funds to candidates and recruited volunteers to work in the campaigns of those sensitive to gay and lesbian issues. Thirty-seven of the endorsements went to persons across the state seeking election to the NC General Assembly. The 38th went to Jim Fuller, a candidate for the NC Supreme Court.

Of those endorsements, 23 were in contested races and 61 percent of those candidates were victorious. The race for House of Representatives in District 40 has yet to be decided as PAC-endorsed candidate Saul Chase faces a run-off election.

Derek Charles Livingston, executive director of the Pride PAC, stated this result was

"about what the rest of the PACs did." He was encouraged by the outcome and by the fact that two candidates, Ruth Cook in District 14 and Margaret Pollard in District 16, included NC Pride PAC in their list of endorsements on campaign materials. This was particularly encouraging since many politicians continue to distance themselves from the gay and lesbian community.

Livingston said this was a very exciting time for the PAC and finds it "very exciting that the gay and lesbian community is taking this kind of role in the electoral process."

While the Pride PAC political committee has not met since the primaries, it is possible that the PAC will issue additional endorsements prior to the November 8 general election. In the meantime, they are continuing to recruit volunteers through their Pride ACT Network and directly through the PAC office. If you would like to become more politically active, contact the PAC office at (919) 829-0343.