

Q Notes

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Published Every Two Weeks On Recycled Paper • Volume 13, Number 4 • July 11, 1998 • FREE

Another "Gang of Five" commissioner goes down in defeat

by Wanda Pico
Special to Q-Notes

CHARLOTTE—Mecklenburg County Commissioner Hoyle Martin failed to obtain enough signatures to run as an independent, at-large candidate in November's county commission election. Martin, the only Democrat considered a member of the "Gang of Five," fell well short of the 16,128 signatures he needed to appear on the ballot as an independent candidate. By the June 26 deadline, the Commissioner and his supporters had only gathered slightly more than 14,000 signatures — some of which were later disqualified because the signers weren't eligible county voters.

Martin's District 2 constituency is predominantly black and overwhelmingly Democratic. He angered both demographics when he sided with the board's four Republicans in several controversial votes last year.

Martin told the *Charlotte Observer* that he thinks his role in the April 1, 1997 commission meeting, when he voted with Republicans

to cut county arts funding because he objected to a play that portrayed gay themes, led to his failure to gather enough names. He was probably also hurt by his vote to restrict any agency receiving county funding from discussing homosexuality.

Martin said he doesn't regret his vote on any issue, but did note that he was wrong to have once commented that if he had his way, "we'd shove these [gay and lesbian] people off the face of the earth."

"In retrospect, that's the only thing I regret of all that's gone on," he said. "That was wrong, cruel, and totally inhuman."

Last December, Martin committed what many

saw as the ultimate party betrayal when he voted to make Republican Tom Bush Commission chairman and himself vice chairman — rather than support Democrat Parks Helms.

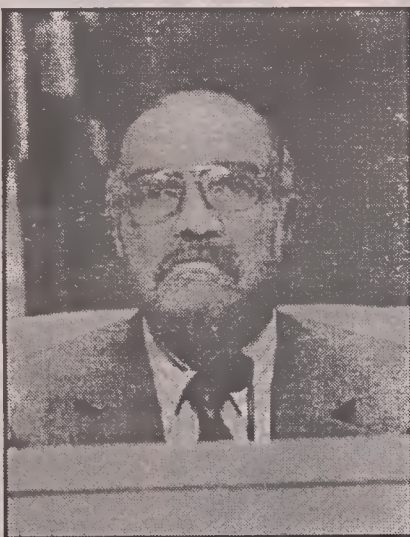
In response, Democrats fielded a candidate to run against Martin. The loss of party support prompted him to change his affiliation to independent and mount an at-large campaign. Conservative Republicans were leading the effort, but their support eroded during county budget talks. Commissioner Bill James, the Republican budget's author, said Martin pledged his support prior to the vote, but

when the time came, instead helped the Democrats defeat the proposal. Martin said that the proposed budget would cut too much from social services and environmental protections.

Republicans accused Martin of being deceitful, leading his GOP foot soldiers to jump ship. Some asked the Board of Elections to remove their names from his petition, including the other ousted Gang member George Higgins.

"Even under the best of circumstances, it would have been difficult to get 16,000 signatures on a petition," commissioner Parks Helms said. "The unfortunate circumstances of recent months have made it more difficult. Not all of that was Hoyle's doing.... Some of it was the mean-spirited environment that we have been operating in."

Martin's failed candidacy leaves seven at-large candidates running for three seats. They are: Democrats Helms and Becky Carney and former commissioner Jim Richardson; Republicans Bush, Tom Vance and Steve Helms; and Libertarian Chris Cole, who is openly gay. ▼



Commissioner Hoyle Martin

Student's complaint triggers civil rights victory

by Joneil Adriano
Special to Q-Notes

FAYETTEVILLE, AR—In an important step in combating harassment of lesbian and gay students nationwide, the federal government reached agreement with the Fayetteville Public Schools in Arkansas on broad civil rights protections in the schools.

The "Commitment to Resolve," entered into by the federal government and the school system, remedies an administrative complaint brought by Fayetteville student William Wagner.

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund represented Wagner, now 17, and his parents, in a sex discrimination complaint to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the US Dept. of Education. The complaint is the first filed under Title IX on behalf of a harassed gay student.

OCR enforces compliance with Title IX, a federal statute that prohibits sex discrimination, including sexual harassment. In March of 1997, OCR released new Title IX guidelines for schools which, for the first time, made explicit

reference to "gay or lesbian students" as also being covered by federal prohibitions against sexual harassment.

"This is the first case in the nation under the new Title IX guidelines' explicit coverage of sexual harassment directed at gay students," said Lambda staff attorney David S. Buckel. "School principals who question whether sexual harassment of gay students is illegal will learn a big lesson from this breakthrough. And now, more lesbian and gay students may be able to finish high school," he said.

Under the agreement with the OCR, the school district must overhaul its policies and procedures and train faculty, staff and students with written reports of progress to the federal office until June 1999.

Throughout 1995 and 1996, several students harassed Wagner in grades eight to 10 at his school; the harassment escalated to a gay bashing by a gang that broke Wagner's nose and bruised a kidney. Criminal charges resulted in probation for those students, but others at the school continued to sexually harass Wagner.

After the school failed to address the on-going harassment, Wagner and his parents filed their OCR complaint in January 1997. The Wagners subsequently pulled William out of school in fear for his life.

Wagner's mother Carolyn welcomed the agreement. "My heart broke when my son was so terribly abused, just for being himself. A mother's dream for her children is that they be happy and healthy, and this includes being safe at school," she said, adding, "This agreement with Fayetteville Schools, hopefully, will safeguard many parents' dreams and protect their kids."

Carolyn Wagner and her husband Bill worked closely with Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), of which they are members, to meet with federal officials on this issue. After hearing of the resolution, PFLAG Executive Director Kirsten Kingdon stated, "We are relieved to hear that the US Department of Education is now making it clear to schools that they have an obligation to protect all of our children." ▼

New GLBT PAC in the Triad

by Bob Conn
Special to Q-Notes

KERNERSVILLE, NC—The Triad Advocacy Network (TAN), a socio-political group that addresses gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues in the Triad area of NC, has voted to establish TAN-PAC, the Triad Advocacy Network Political Action Committee.

TAN-PAC will concentrate on local elections: boards of county commissioners, school boards, city councils/boards of aldermen and races for sheriff, initially focusing on Forsyth and Guilford counties, but eventually making recommendations throughout the Triad.

For five years, TAN has worked in advocacy, voter registration and education and media relations in the Triad — and those efforts will continue — but state elections laws preclude the group from actually making election recommendations or giving financial support to worthy candidates. Political action committees, however, can legally operate in both of those areas.

TAN-PAC will serve as a local parallel to NC Pride PAC, which focuses on candidates and issues relating to the NC General Assembly, and the Human Rights Campaign, which works on the federal level.

Unfortunately, neither the Human Rights Campaign nor NC Pride PAC has the resources to operate at the local level — where the GLBT community's fight with the Religious Right will be won or lost. Conservative leaders have declared it their goal to take over every school board and are succeeding. Some right-wing candidates have already been elected in the Triad and more are running.

Contributions are needed to counter the effort. Because TAN is a political action committee, contributions to the group are not tax deductible and donors must be recorded by name. Although anonymous donations are prohibited, only gifts of more than \$100 during an election cycle have to be reported to the state. All lesser donations are exempt from this requirement.

The Religious Right's number one advantage is money. With that money, they produce mass mailings, voter education information, advertisements and hire staff. They distribute their literature in conservative churches and directly fund candidates who support their causes.

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New book examines the rituals of gay weddings

by Mary Geraghty
Special to Q-Notes

IOWA CITY, IA—As activists and politicians debate the merits and drawbacks to same-sex marriages, a University of Iowa professor has taken a step back to look at the rituals involved in these ceremonies and what they represent for the couples as well as for society as a whole.

Ellen Lewin, an associate professor of women's studies and anthropology, interviewed

more than 50 gay and lesbian couples who had held "commitment ceremonies" as part of the anthropological fieldwork for her new book *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

Although she is publishing at a time when same-sex marriage is a hot political topic, Lewin said she came to the study "less out of my active concern with the implications of the struggle to achieve legality for same-sex mar-

riage than from a desire to fashion a cultural understanding of lesbian and gay weddings as powerful and complex ritual occasions."

The book examines the rituals involved in same-sex marriages and sets forth five central themes related to the ceremonies: family, community, authenticity, resistance and tradition.

Lewin found two distinct views on same-sex marriage within the gay community. Some couples see their marriage as a way for their relationship to be recognized just as a heterosexual relationship would be — in essence, a way for them to be "just like everybody else." On the other hand, some gay couples think that by publicly announcing their love for and commitment to one another in a ceremony, they are advancing the more "radical" or "in your face" aspects of gay culture.

However, Lewin said that while most couples identify with only one of those two viewpoints, most ceremonies she observed exhibited both "traditional" and "radical" quali-

ties. "What people think they're doing and what they are actually doing are really very different," she said.

Lewin said that her research did not identify any "typical" or "exemplary" gay wedding, but that the ceremonies have in common the fact they are "grounded in a particular social, political, and historical context in which gender is an embattled domain and inequality based on sexual orientation has become visible to a perhaps unprecedented degree."

"As such, these ceremonies draw on related sources of meaning and stand together as coherent reflections of what it means to be gay and American on the eve of the millennium," Lewin said.

Lewin's interest in the subject of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies was sparked in 1992 when she and her partner held their own ceremony. Her academic work on motherhood among lesbians, which resulted in the 1993 book *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture*, seemed to be a natural lead-in to studying same-sex marriages.

"In my study of lesbian mothers, I found what seemed at first to be curious combinations of rebellious and conventional impulses,"

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"I found what seemed at first to be curious combinations of rebellious and conventional impulses," — Ellen Lewin