

Gay cops strike blow against TG conference a first for Charlotte bigoted Puerto Rican policy

by Peg Byron
Special to Q-Notes

NEW YORK—In an important victory for gay law enforcement personnel and the Puerto Rican gay community, a federal judge struck down a disciplinary rule that absolutely prohibited Puerto Rico police officers from associating with lesbians and gay men.

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund brought the case, *Ramos v. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico*, after the Puerto Rico Police Department (PRPD) harassed lesbian and gay police officers during their 1995 convention in San Juan. Members of the Gay Officers Action League (GOAL) had hoped to form a local affiliate to advocate on behalf of lesbian and gay law enforcement personnel in Puerto Rico.

The Federal District Court for the District of Puerto Rico ruled that the section of the PRPD disciplinary code known as Regulation 29 violated the First Amendment. Regulation 29 states, "It is a grave offense for police officers to associate with prostitutes, homosexuals, or other persons of dubious reputation." Police officers who violated this regulation risked official reprimands or even dismissal.

In a 29-page decision, US District Judge Hector M. Laffitte said, "The evidence in the record, including the testimony of police department officials and Plaintiffs' proposed experts, all lead to the conclusion that the rule is unnecessary...Therefore, the Court is compelled to hold that the prohibition in Regulation 29 against associating with homosexuals furthers no state interest and violates the First Amendment."

Lambda managing attorney Ruth Harlow said, "Regulation 29 made lesbian and gay Puerto Ricans pariahs to their own police force. The regulation's demise means that they can now expect equal access to members of their police department and to no longer be treated as outcasts."

"The court's decision exposes the fatal constitutional flaw of this absolute ban — there is no justification for any law enforcement agency to prohibit its officers from associating with lesbians and gay men," said Lambda staff attorney Suzanne B. Goldberg. "Police officers and the communities they serve must be free to associate with one another," she added.

Heavy police presence greeted members of GOAL when they arrived for the convention. Some PRPD officers jeered and shouted anti-gay epithets. The PRPD also prevented GOAL from holding a short, symbolic walk designed to raise lesbian and gay visibility. In another incident, a squadron of police, in riot gear and with guns drawn, illegally raided a lesbian bar on the night of a widely publicized reception for GOAL.

Along with their challenge to Regulation 29, GOAL and Dr. Rosalina Ramos Padro, a Puerto Rico lesbian activist who owned the bar at the time of the raid, also challenged the harassing incidents as violations of their First Amendment rights and equal protection guarantees under the Constitutions of the United States and Puerto Rico. The court ruled that the plaintiffs' challenge to the PRPD's interference with the symbolic walk must go to trial.

In a separate 22-page ruling, the court also ordered that GOAL and Ramos can go to trial on several of their claims regarding the bar raid. The question for trial will be whether the officers had singled out the bar and its patrons for anti-gay harassment and to retaliate against GOAL and Ramos for publicly supporting lesbian and gay police officers.

New York attorney Colleen Meenan, who with Lambda is co-counsel to GOAL, added, "Our victory sends a clear signal to other police departments that they must treat the lesbian and gay community with the same respect that all communities deserve. Impeding the basic First Amendment rights of police officers with such an across-the-board rule is unconstitutional, plain and simple."

Carroll Hunter, a plaintiff in the case and GOAL's president when the confrontations with the PRPD occurred, said, "For years, we've worked under the rule's cloud and had to meet Puerto Rican officers in hidden locations." He added, "Now, GOAL can finally work directly and openly to help make the PRPD a better place for lesbian and gay criminal justice personnel, and better equipped to respond to its lesbian and gay constituencies." ▼

by Divinity
Special to Q-Notes

CHARLOTTE—On Saturday, September 26, Charlotte's GLBT youth advocacy organization, Time Out Youth, hosted an all-day conference for area therapists on transgender (TG) issues. The conference, titled "Struggling To Be: Developmental Paths of Transgender People," was held at the Great Aunt Stella Center in Charlotte.

The keynote speaker was Erin Swenson, B.S., M.Div., Th.M., Ph.D., LSMT, who is a post-operative, male-to-female transsexual minister. Rev. Swenson successfully petitioned to retain her ordination as a Presbyterian minister in 1996 and is currently a pastoral counselor in Atlanta.

Panel members included Charlotte's Terji O'Connel, a former NASCAR driver; T. J. Haynes; Asheville's Holly Boswell, one of the TG community's most well-known and highly respected activists; and several other post-operative transsexuals, all of whom were from the greater Charlotte area. The panel discussed their individual transitions, when they first began to recognize the differences between their birth gender and their preferred gender, the struggles and anguish each experienced as a result of those differences and the losses each encountered while on their path to gender reassignment surgery. All of their stories were in-

tensely personal and touching.

Professional panel members included Dan Biber, Ph.D.; attorney Lynn Bishop; Karen Butler, Ph.D.; Debra Coles, MD; Lisa Griffin, Ph.D.; and Carla Pridgen, M.Div.

The conference was well attended, including several members of the TG community, and questions from attendees reflected the therapists' desire to better understand the TG phenomenon.

This was a very successful first transgender conference for Time Out Youth and they were commended by the attendees for hosting it. For more information on Time Out Youth, write to 4037 E. Independence Blvd., Suite G-33, Charlotte, NC 28205 or call (704) 537-5050.

Another TG conference planned

The First Annual TRANS America Transgender Conference, a Trans-Millennium Event, will be held in Charlotte May 13-15, 1999. Presenters include many of the transgender community's leaders, activists, vendors, authors, care-providers, entertainers and scholars.

The three-day event will be held at the Sheraton Airport Plaza Hotel and will feature seminars, casual gatherings and several outside activities. For more information, write TRANS America Conference, PO Box 221841, Charlotte, NC 28222 or visit their web site at www.q-notes.com/transamerica.htm. ▼

Friday, October 30...Pre Halloween Party

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 - Wicked Witch & Warlock Pageant
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