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Confederate "Stepdaughters" protest battle flag in Columbia

by Charlie Smith
Special to Q-Notes

COLUMBIA, SC—South Carolina's debate over the Confederate battle flag took a turn toward the downright outrageous on July 1 as a group of about 15 gay and straight supporters of the South Carolina Progressive Network donned what they called "White Trash Drag" on the Statehouse grounds and performed what social justice advocate Tom Turnipseed labeled, "The best political satire I've ever seen!"

Calling themselves the Stepdaughters of the Confederacy, these 15 or so "women" of the South — with names like Dixie Whitebread, Lois Carmen DeNominator, Shalla Jean Pool, Eileen Wayright, Ima White Ravenel, I. Emma Throwback and Vanna Very White — arrived at the ceremony for the relocation of the Confederate battle flag piled onto the backs of two pick-up trucks. They sported signs that read "If you get a divorce in SC are you still brother and sister?" and "Hate is a family value," among others.

"Hello, we're really embarrassed to be here," said Shalla Jean Pool. "The problem in this state is that we got too many of the wrong people votin'" said Eileen Wayright to chants of "poll tax, poll tax!" from her supporters.

Her comments were followed by a rousing rendition of the 1953 Tom Lehrer tune "I Wanna Go Back to Dixie" sung by Miss Lois Carmen DeNominator. This song has only rarely been heard in public, and probably never in SC — and certainly never like this!

Miss DeNominator had high praise for some local politicians who have supported the Confederate battle flag, especially Republican Rep. John Graham Altman and Republican Sen. Glenn McConnell, both of Charleston.

"When we was tryin' to pass our education

bill last year to keep liquor out of public schools, it was John Graham Altman what come up with the idea to raise the drinkin' age to 32!" Senator McConnell, who had said on Friday that he would not attend the ceremony because of planned "protests," was unsuccessfully called to the microphone several times with "Where are ya, Glenn? Aren't ya here?" and "Wonder if the boys at Ft. Johnson ran that fast!"

The Stepdaughters ended their program by erecting their own monument to the 112th General Assembly on the Statehouse grounds: a seven-foot-tall "Lawn Jockey" which was given to commemorate the cultural and racial insensitivity of the legislators. It is a fitting tribute, they said, to a state government that would raise

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Miss Lois Carmen DeNominator

Coca-Cola adds DP health benefits

by Anabel Evora
Special to Q-Notes

ATLANTA—The Coca-Cola Company announced June 22 that it plans to extend health care benefits to same-sex domestic partners of its US-based employees. The benefits will begin January 1, 2001, and employees will be able to sign up during the fall benefits-enrollment period. The company also said it is researching the possibility of implementing the policy globally.

"This is excellent news, and yet another sign that domestic partner benefits are becoming a standard component of benefits packages at

forward-thinking companies," said Kim Mills, education director of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and overseer of WorkNet, HRC's workplace project. "With this announcement, Coke becomes the 99th member of the Fortune 500 to take this important step."

HRC and its business council have been working with Coca-Cola and KOLAGE, its lesbian and gay employee resource group, for many months on this issue, Mills said. HRC WorkNet provided data, strategy and other advice as needed.

"Our company is committed to attracting

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VT civil unions law takes effect, putting fairness in full swing

by Peg Byron
Special to Q-Notes

BRATTLEBORO, VT—In the first few minutes of July 1, the town of Brattleboro made history by issuing the state's first civil union license to Kathleen Peterson, 41, and Carolyn Conrad, 29. The license, and the ceremony which followed, give Peterson's and Conrad's five-year relationship legal recognition. As about a dozen protestors looked on, Justice of the Peace T. Hunter Wilson told the couple, "By the powers vested in me by the State of Vermont, I join you in civil union."

The State of Vermont set an historic benchmark for the recognition of lesbian and gay families, extending to same-sex couples nearly all the rights, protections, and obligations of marriage. Starting July 1, gay couples in Vermont are able to apply for a civil union, a parallel institution to civil marriage. Civil unions provide protections in inheritance and property division, child custody and visitation, family leave, state tax advantages and other benefits of marriage under state law.

Like those planning marriage, couples seeking a civil union must receive a license, while dissolution proceedings will be handled in divorce court. The law exceeds even Hawaii's current Reciprocal Beneficiaries legislation, as well as all domestic partnership programs.

"Through this law, Vermont becomes a pioneer for families and equality. Americans will see that as lesbians and gay men are given access to most of the rights and obligations of civil marriage, the sky will not fall and the institution of marriage will be even stronger," said Evan Wolfson, director of Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's Marriage Project, and a leader in the nationwide effort to secure

the freedom to marry for gay couples.

He added, "The majority of Americans today believe that gay and lesbian people will win the freedom to marry. That gives hope that those same-sex couples who are civilly united someday soon will be treated as fully equal, which means one line at the marriage bureau, rather than two."

In April, the Vermont legislature passed the "Act Relating to Civil Unions" which extends to gay couples the effect of every state law, regulation, and court precedent that applies to married couples. The legislation was in response to a ruling by the Vermont Supreme Court in *Baker v. Vermont* which last December held that the state was constitutionally obligated to treat gay couples equally.

For the purposes of state law, Vermont spouses in a civil union will enjoy the same state-level protections and responsibilities available to spouses in a civil marriage. Couples from outside Vermont also will have a valid civil union, although it is unclear how their home states or the private sector will treat their civil unions.

Lambda Legal Director Beatrice Dohrn said, "We hope many states will follow Vermont's lead by recognizing these civil unions and establishing their own civil union laws. Even the more than 30 states which have discriminatory marriage laws are not exempt from recognizing either the civil unions or the spouses' familial relationships." She added, "For complete security, couples in a civil union should continue maintaining wills, powers of attorney, health care proxies, parenting agreements, and other legal documents to safeguard their family." ▼

[Additional reporting by Dan Van Mourik, Q-Notes staff writer.]

Victim of anti-gay murder remembered at candlelight vigil

Officials increasingly convinced that hate was a factor in slaying

by Anabel Evora
Special to Q-Notes

GRANT TOWN, WV—A black, gay man who police say was beaten to death, then repeatedly run over with a car by two teenagers was remembered at a July 11 candlelight vigil organized by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Arthur Warren Jr., 26, was found on state Route 17, the spot where investigators say his 17-year-old killers, both white, dumped him and staged a hit-and-run. HRC called on local law enforcement officials to thoroughly investigate the murder as a hate crime.

"After spending several days in West Virginia talking to people who knew Arthur, we believe that racial and anti-gay prejudice played a role in his death," said HRC Communications Director David M. Smith.

"We urge local officials to thoroughly investigate and prosecute this case to complete justice," said HRC Constituent Field Organizer Donna Payne at the vigil. "We must find out why this happened in order to keep it from ever happening again."

Marion County (WV) Sheriff Ron Watkins and Prosecutor G. Richard Bunner have failed to adequately explain why they are refusing to consider hate as a motive in the Grant Town incident, Smith noted.

The candlelight vigil took place at the county's community courthouse in Fairmont, WV. HRC has dispatched three staff members to assess the situation and to offer assistance to the local community. They are Smith, Deputy Field Director Liz Seaton and Payne who works with people of color and faith communities.

The vigil was picketed by Westboro Baptist Church, a Topeka, KS-based anti-gay group led by the Rev. Fred Phelps, who also picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard. Phelps told *The Charleston Gazette* in a July 10 news article, "Every time they kill a young fag, the homosexual groups try to make a cause célèbre out of it."

Warren, whose body was found July 4, had left his parents' house the previous day and walked across town to a vacant house where the two boys beat and kicked him to death, according to local law enforcement officials. After putting Warren's body into the trunk of a car, the two teens drove a mile east of Grant Town, laid his body on the ground and then drove over it several times in an attempt to stage a hit-and-run accident.

The alleged perpetrators later burned their bloody clothes, the officials said. A 16-year-old boy who witnessed the murder confessed to his mother and to the police that he had seen the killing and helped the other boys clean up the crime scene, officials said.

The alleged perpetrators have been charged with first-degree murder, according to Chip

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