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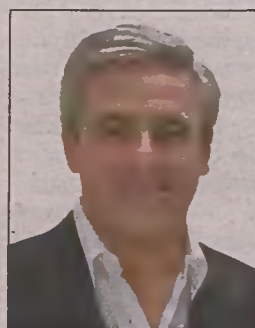
becoming politically involved."

Further, Thomas says HRC's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Program has worked closely with students at North Carolina Central University, UNC-Pembroke, N.C. A&T University and Winston-Salem State University.

Students from N.C. A&T were present at the HBCU national leadership summit. "Training from the summit helped their student group to secure a substantial grant that allowed the group to go on a planning retreat with a focus on how they can better educate and engage their campus community," he said.

HRC & Religion

Mitchell Gold, who owns the North Carolina-based Mitchell Gold+Bob Williams furniture company, is a national HRC sponsor



Mitchell Gold

and former member of their board of directors. In simple terms, he says, HRC and its various entities can be described best as "an advocacy organization."

"They lobby on Capitol Hill," he explains. "The political action committee raises money to support politicians who support us, which means they raise the money to have access and influence. HRC's non-profit wing is the group's educational arm."

Gold has encouraged the group to dig into the "religion issue." Gold, founder of the group Faith in America, is also the editor of "Crisis: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay In America." [Ed. Note — This writer is a contributor to "Crisis."]

"You don't have to discuss 'religion,'" Gold says to HRC, "but you can discuss the history of religion-based bigotry. That's what we should be talking to politicians about. HRC doesn't have to go on and quote Leviticus and Romans but they have not yet found an effective way to counter the religious argument."

The Carolinas are no stranger to HRC's Religion and Faith Program. In February 2008, just days before last year's HRC Carolinas Gala, the group's Religion and Faith director, Rev. Harry Knox, stood up as a strong, affirming voice in a public debate with

one of the Charlotte area's most outspoken anti-gay religious leaders, Dr. Michael Brown. When he was first hired, Knox appeared as the speaker at a dinner meeting of the Triad Business & Professional Guild in Greensboro. In 2008, HRC sponsored a screening of "For the Bible Tells Me So" on the campus of the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

"The religion program does good work," Gold says. "But ultimately, it doesn't have a prominence in HRC's organization, that really says 'We understand that the majority of people against LGBT people having equal rights use their religious beliefs.'"

Thirteen religious leaders and scholars, including Harry Knox, currently sit on HRC's Religion Council. The council helps HRC speak on issues of faith and spirituality and represents a broad range of diversity and several Christian denominations. A Jewish rabbi, Denise L. Eger of Los Angeles' Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim, also serves on the council.

Local presence

Ryan Wilson, president of the South Carolina Pride Movement, interned with HRC in the summer of 2007. Working in Washington, D.C., he had the opportunity to work on several projects that benefit local LGBT communities and those that effect change on a national level.

"It was a great opportunity for me to see the GLBT rights movement as a functioning entity," he said. "Coming from South Carolina where all of our non-profits have no paid staffers or just one paid staffer, to have a whole building full of gay activists was an experience."

Wilson said he appreciates the hard work of HRC's staff in D.C. and around the nation. While interning there he said he "got to see the depths of experience and knowledge the staff had."

But like many others, Wilson says he sees room for improvement — changes that could bring the group more support from local communities. In South Carolina, Wilson says he'd love to see more national support for on-the-ground work with U.S. House of Representatives Majority Whip, Rep. James Clyburn.

"His district is Columbia," Wilson says. "There should be a group organizing in Columbia that gets Clyburn on board when the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and hate crimes legislation comes back up."

While there are already local leaders on the ground, Wilson says, many of them are defi-

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