

Q-NOTES

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Activists Fight Rampant Discrimination Gay Firings Create Debate

By David Stout
Q-Notes Staff

When Jefferey Sherrill went to work on the morning of January 28 at the Cracker Barrel Country Store where he was employed, he had no idea how much his life would change.

"It was right before 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, halfway through my shift, when I was called to the manager's office for something. We were doing inventory so I didn't think anything about it.

"But when I got in there, there was the General Manager, Dave Pittman, the Gift Shop Manager, Annette Hanlon, the District Gift Shop Manager, Dan Markly, and the District Restaurant Manager, Stan Warner," Sherrill stated.

When he asked what was going on, Sherrill was told by his General Manager, Dave Pittman, that it had been brought to their attention that he was homosexual, and since this was a violation of written company policy, he would have to be let go.

"Dave did all the talking. The others just stood there and let Dave say everything — except Dan Markly. He was the one who said that 'Cracker Barrel has a wholesome American image and homosexuality does not fit that image.'"

Stunned, Sherrill asked Pittman if he was really going to be let go "just like that," which was affirmed. He next asked if he should go punch out right then and was told yes. Sherrill walked back to the time clock, followed by Pittman, punched out and went home in a daze.

"I really didn't understand, I was a good employee. I always did everything, more than what was expected of me. On my last review I was given a 95 percent rating and over the course of my two and a half years of working for Cracker Barrel, had even travelled for the store.

"Then to be fired for violation of a company policy on homosexuality, which I didn't even know about, was ridiculous. I called the Employment Security Commission to find out what I could do but quickly learned that I didn't have a leg to stand on, there are no laws which protect gay people from discrimination."

Sherrill then began to use the resources available to him. The media was more than willing to get involved, and, with Sherrill's cooperation, began to draw public attention to the wrongful firing.

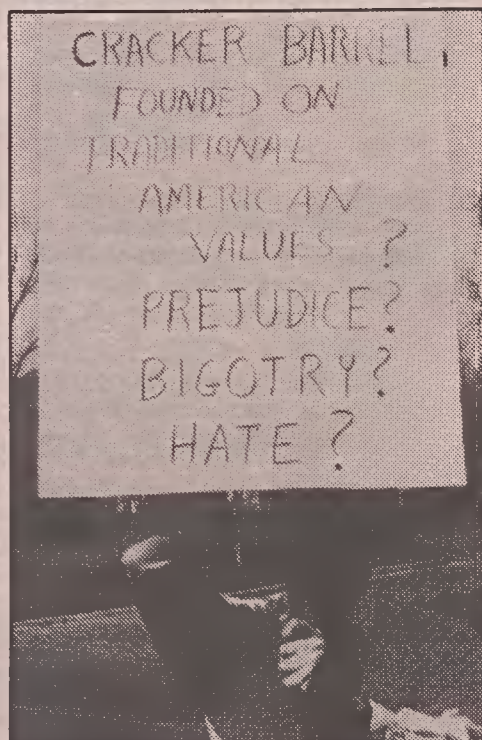
In the ensuing weeks, Sherrill was featured on news broadcasts of WSOC-TV, and WBT-TV, and appeared in two *Charlotte Observer* articles, one of which ran on the front page of the newspaper.

Community Center: Ready Or Not?

By Dan Kirsch
Q-Notes Staff

When the Metrolina Community Services Project (MCSP) announced in January that they would not move forward with the proposed Community Center project, it was left up to other individuals or groups to begin rethinking the Center on their own terms.

Ruth Derrow, chair of the Center committee, made the first public announcement about MCSP's decision at the January 22 meeting of the Charlotte Gay & Lesbian Leadership Coalition. This group of leaders meets every other month to share information about current activities in their respective organizations, helping each other to understand what is in process and to avoid duplication of efforts.



One of the 40 picketers at Cracker Barrel in Charlotte.

"I had no idea that things would go this far. I just wanted to see if I had any legal rights to protect myself."

The media blitz that Sherrill got caught up in was fueled by the fact that these firings were taking place all over the Southeast during the same time.

When Cracker Barrel officially adopted its written policy on the non-employment of homosexuals ("...It is inconsistent with our concept and values, and is perceived to be inconsistent with those of our customer base to continue to employ individuals in our operating units whose sexual preference fails to demonstrate normal heterosexual values which have been the foundation of families in our society") at least 11 employees in four states (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee) were summarily terminated for their sexual orientation.

These firings led to a mass protest on Sunday, March 17, at store locations in every state where the dismissals took place. At the Charlotte store ("unit"), located on the South I-85 Service Road, protesters assembled at 10:30 a.m. to prepare for their 11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. demonstration. After a quick conference with the police officers who were on hand to oversee the demonstration, the protesters began to march around the grassy fore-yard of the restaurant carrying signs and

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The Coalition over time has included representatives from Black and White Men Together, First Tuesday Association for Gay & Lesbian Equality, Lambda Connections, Metrolina AIDS Project, MCC Charlotte, MCC New Life, MCSP (representing the Switchboard, Queen City Friends and the Speaker's Bureau), the NAMES Project, ONE VOICE, Older Wiser Lesbians (OWLS), Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Q-Notes, WOW, and other organizations and businesses.

The Coalition began in the spring of 1986 by Queen City Quordinators. As time progressed, a facilitator was needed and John Quillin was asked to serve in that role. First,

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1990 Hate Crimes Statistics Released

By David Stout
Q-Notes Staff

The findings from the 1990 North Carolina Hate Crimes Documentation Project were released Wednesday, March 6, at a press conference held at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in downtown Charlotte.

The 1991 figures were presented to members of the media by a panel of four North Carolina activists: John Owens, Media Relations Chairperson of First Tuesday Association for Gay and Lesbian Equality; Martha Wilson, co-chair of North Carolina Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality; Chris Werte, compiler of hate crimes statistics for Charlotte/Mecklenburg County; and Janelle Lavelle, compiler of hate crimes statistics for Guilford County and editor of the state report.

At 10:30 a.m., John Owens began the press conference by giving a brief history of the Documentation Project. He related that Hate Crimes documentation began in North Carolina in 1983 as a joint effort of the North Carolina Human Relations Fund and GROW, the Gay/Lesbian community center in Wilmington.

But this year, the responsibility of coordinating the statewide figures compilation was given over to the North Carolina Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCCGLE). Owens further pointed out that in 1987 and again in 1989, North Carolina

led the nation in the number of reported incidents perpetrated against homosexuals.

With his overview concluded, Owens then turned the microphone over to Martha Wilson, who spoke about the numbers and figures reported for the entire state.

She announced that this year the number of reported incidents had once again hit a new record. In 1989, there were 1,204 documented incidents of violence, harassment and discrimination directed at gay people.

In 1990, there were 1,530 reported incidents. However, she quickly pointed out that this is by no means the total amount of incidents which occurred; it is only the amount of violations reported.

Another factor, shored up by evidence from the report, is the rise of incidents centered around the amount of anti-gay and lesbian rhetoric which was espoused by candidates during both the primaries and the general elections.

As Jesse Helms, Sue Myrick and Jim Gardner stumped throughout the state disseminating homophobic misinformation as part of election speeches, there were marked increases in the number of reported incidents during the same period. Therefore, a relationship could definitely be drawn between the personal opinions of public officials and their direct effect in motivating private citizens into negative activities.

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Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?

By Keith Bulla
Special to Q-Notes

By the time Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn sat down to dinner in the memorable 1967 film "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?" their characters had learned a great deal about love and compassion and had set aside years of prejudice and misunderstanding.

Now some of Charlotte's best hosts and hostesses are getting ready to welcome a cast of characters who are also challenging misconceptions.

Who's coming to dinner? Hundreds of Charlotteans who are reaching out to those whose lives have been touched by the AIDS crisis.

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" is an at-home benefit for Metrolina AIDS Project (MAP) that will give everyone the opportunity to support the work of this important agency.

Here's how the event works: At seven o'clock in the evening of May 11, 1991, in homes all over town, some of Charlotte's most celebrated hosts and hostesses will have dinner parties for their friends — using their own guest lists.

Some may host intimate seated dinners for 8 or 12; others will entertain festive crowds of 20-30; still others will be flipping burgers by the pool or at the lake for several hundred of their closest friends.

In return for their hosts' hospitality, each guest will be asked to "pick up the dinner tab" by making a contribution to Metrolina AIDS Project.

Right now, MAP needs additional hosts who are willing to open their hearts by opening their homes to friends. It's easy to get involved. Simply call the MAP office at 333-1435, and the "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" coordinators will help hosts with invitations and logistics for the evening of May 11.

But who's coming to dinner? We'll find out the answer to that question after dinner when all of the hosts and hostesses and their

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BEST BETS

April

- 2-7 Miss Gay USA Pageant
- 6-7 Lesbian/Gay Business/Crafts Expo
- 8-12 UNCC Gay Awareness Week
- 24-28 National Lesbian Conference
- 26-28 MCC (GLAD) District Conference

May

- 3 Evening Under The Stars
- 11 Guess Who's Coming

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