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Vol. 8, No. 8
August 1993

The Carolinas' Most Comprehensive Gay & Lesbian Newspaper Printed on Recycled Paper FREE

Gay activist runs for office

by Darryl R. Williams
Special to Q-Notes

CARRBORO, NC—Gay activist Mike Nelson announced recently that he will make a second run for one of three, open, at-large seats on the Carrboro Board of Aldermen. Nelson, who sought a seat in 1989 and lost by only 32 votes, said the voters of Carrboro are ready to elect an official willing to take a stand on tough issues, regardless of the candidate's sexual orientation.

"Certainly my sexual orientation is a part of the campaign because it's not a secret to anyone in town," he said, "but it just doesn't matter to most of the people in Carrboro. They just want someone to focus on the issues."

The issues most important to Nelson are broad: increasing Triangle-wide transportation and bringing it into Carrboro; protecting the environment, including controlling the Carrboro water quality, expanding accessibility to recycling, and keeping pollution in check by increasing the use of public transportation; and controlling the town's spiraling crime problem.

"These are all very important issues for me, but, more importantly, they are important to Carrboro," Nelson said.

A Jacksonville native and longtime resident of Carrboro, Nelson obtained a degree in political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He feels his varied political and civic activism over the past 11 years in Orange County has made him more prepared than ever to represent the voters of Carrboro. He is currently the vice chair of the Orange County Democratic Party; and has worked both nationally and locally on issues such as abortion rights, day care, and transportation. In addition, Nelson attended the 1992 Democratic National Convention as an openly gay delegate.

"The convention was such an affirming, gay-positive experience for me," Nelson said. "It reaffirmed my belief in the democratic process."

Nelson's political work has also included issues of particular importance to the gay and lesbian community. He managed Joe Herzenberg's successful campaign for a seat on the Chapel Hill Town Council. Herzenberg is currently the only openly gay elected official in North Carolina.

"Working on Joe's campaign was a sig-

nificant part of my political development," Nelson said. "We put together one of the best campaigns that's ever existed for a seat on the Chapel Hill Town Council, and I carried from that a lot of knowledge and experience that I've been able to put to good use." Nelson has yet to name the individual who will manage his campaign.

Nelson also recently served as executive director of Pride PAC, a political action committee dedicated to helping gay and lesbian candidates and gay-affirming candidates get elected in North Carolina.

"My experience in running Pride PAC, which is a statewide organization, helped me mostly in developing my organizational skills," Nelson said.

Although issues that are specifically pertinent to gays and lesbians do not top Nelson's agenda, he believes it is critical that openly gay and lesbian candidates seek and win elected offices to demonstrate our presence in communities nationwide.

"Different polls have shown that several cities in North Carolina can elect gay candidates," Nelson said. "The problem is that people are either not interested or don't think they can win."

Herzenberg believes Nelson's interests in public office and diverse interest on issues make him a valuable asset to the gay and lesbian community. He also views Nelson as an unusual entity because so few gay and lesbian activists choose the mainstream political system as a battleground.

"Very few gay activists are interested in running for public office and being scrutinized as public officials are," he said. "You also have to have almost a perfect balance of general community and gay interests. If you're seen strictly as a 'gay candidate,' you won't get votes outside of the gay and lesbian community. And if you ignore the gay issues, you will not get the support of the gay community. It's a very fine line we walk."

Nelson said one of the reasons he's spent most of his time in establishment politics is because that's where he saw the greatest need.

"I wouldn't call the mainstream political system the best or worst way to get things done," he said. "I just think that for the lesbian and gay movement to be successful, we need to have full-fledged involvement in all aspects of politics, whether it's in the

Republican Party or the Democratic Party, establishment politics or street politics. As a movement, we won't be really successful until we've developed a wide range of tactics and organizational structures."



Mike Nelson

Herzenberg said the election of openly lesbian and gay officials was one of the keys to empowering the community.

"When we get people elected, we will have the power to change the things that need to be changed," Herzenberg said. "We will not be able to change the world, but we will definitely make small changes and move in the right direction."

In the past eight years, gays and lesbians nationally have definitely been moving in the right direction. In 1985, there were about 14 openly gay and lesbian elected officials in the United States; currently, there are approximately 80. Herzenberg expects the number to top 100 by the end of 1993. In North Carolina, though, the magic number is two.

"I would be more than happy to give up the honor of being the only openly gay elected official in North Carolina," Herzenberg said.

Play provides exploration of discrimination

by Brent L. Pack
Q-Notes Staff

If ART imitates LIFE, then conversely, maybe, LIFE can imitate ART, or at least the meanings and messages conveyed through art. Art could then expose the injustices and problems, and life could recognize and take the initiative to solve them. In the hope that this process could occur, everyone, no matter in what subset of society, should see "My Castle's Rockin'," the 31st world premiere of the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre in Mars Hill, North Carolina.

This innovative, one-woman show written by Florida playwright Larry Parr and starring Ginnie Randall subtly but effectively examines the discrimination and prejudice which faces everyone in society, not just a particular segment. "My Castle's Rockin'" chronicles the life of Alberta Hunter, the prima donna of jazz in the early and middle 1900s.

This musical biography, featuring jazz pianist virtuoso Jay Flippin, begins with Alberta at age 82 contemplating a return to her singing career at a local club; however, she does not want the public "snooping" in her life again. While considering her return to public life, memories begin to flood her mind and unfold upon the stage.

At age 14, after being sexually molested by her school principal, Alberta ran away from her home in Memphis, TN for the bright lights of Chicago. She began singing in the clubs there, bringing to them the deep, rich, spiritual music that had been passed down from generation to generation within her culture. This music would later become known as jazz.

Because of her deep, rich voice and expressive gestures, Alberta developed a large following in the Chicago area; however, it was Lottie Williams, the niece of the vaudevillian star Bert Williams, who developed a particular affinity for her. Alberta, who was distrustful of men because of her molestation, found love and trust in a place where she never imagined—with a woman. With Lottie, Alberta found the security and love that she

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Vigil held on compromise

by Kevin Menken
Special to Q-Notes

COLUMBIA—About 100 supporters of the movement to lift the ban on gays and lesbians in the military held a candlelight vigil at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial near downtown Columbia on July 21 to protest President Clinton's compromise plan for gays in the armed forces.

The vigil, sponsored by the city's Gay and Lesbian Pride March (GLPM), was called after the president's announcement on July 19 of a version of the "don't ask, don't tell" proposal that included provisions for gays and lesbians to refrain from homosexual conduct on or off their bases during their tenure in the military.

Protesters sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" and special lyrical versions of "We Shall

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Unitarians affirm gay rights

by Jeanette Leardi & Kimberly Melton
Special to Q-Notes

CHARLOTTE—As a demonstration of its ongoing commitment to affirming the rights and dignity of all gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) presented numerous workshops and events during its recent 32nd annual General Assembly (GA) convention, held in uptown Charlotte.

From June 24-29, more than 2500 congregational representatives of the over 200,000 Unitarian Universalists (UUs) in the U.S. and Canada met to share ideas and strategies for upholding their religious denomination's liberal principles of freedom and tolerance in the face of increasing social and political pressure from the "Religious Right."

"The religious right has targeted gay, lesbian and bisexual people for political persecution," said the Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz, outgoing UUA president in his 1993

President's Report address to the Assembly. "Our sisters and brothers are dying for the sentiments of their hearts, and we Unitarian Universalists are saying with the most unequivocal of voices, 'This cannot continue!'"

In an impassioned speech to the GA delegates and attendees, Rev. Schulz urged them to maintain their denomination's long-standing commitment to social justice. "Oppression still plagues this world in many forms," he stated, "but one of those forms against which Unitarian Universalism still stands virtually alone among religious bodies is the denigration and scapegoating of gay, lesbian and bisexual people ... Unitarian Universalism's commitment to gay and lesbian rights is now more than twenty years old. But, unfortunately, my friends, this battle is just beginning."

Reflecting this intent to win the "battle," the GA Planning Committee organized a significant number of workshops and events

addressing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender concerns.

Prominent among the sponsoring organizations was Interweave—UUs for Lesbians and Transgender Concerns—which presented a workshop entitled "Our Youth Are At Risk: Working With Our Lesbian Youth."

Another GA workshop, "The Religious Right's Political Agenda," featured speakers Scott Nakagawa of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and Deanna Duby, deputy director of policy for People For The American Way. During that session, the strategies of the religious right were discussed, with particular attention paid to its alleged current plans to target all U.S. states for the establishment of homophobic legislation.

"We really want the UUA to be ready and to be there when the Federal Civil Rights Bill comes up," said the Rev. Meg Riley, a lesbian and director of the UUA Office for Gay and

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