

# QNotes

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Photo: Jim Yarbrough

**Charlotte's Lisa and Lori were among those "tying the knot" for National Freedom to Marry Day**

## Maine voters repeal anti-bias law

by Mark F. Johnson  
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC— February 10 was a disappointing day for Maine's GLBT citizens and allies as voters approved a referendum that repealed the state's civil rights law banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The measure, known as the Maine Human Rights Act, was passed by the state legislature and signed into law by Governor Angus King last May. A conservative group led by members of the Christian Civic League of Maine and the state chapter of the Christian Coalition secured signatures to put the issue to a public vote, employing Maine's rarely used "people's veto" provision. The repeal amendment was passed by a margin of 4 percent.

"The right wing again used a divisive campaign to sell the lie of 'special rights' at the ballot box," said Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). "We will continue our efforts to secure civil rights laws in every state."

Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, asserted that the vote's outcome was not representative of citizens' feelings on the amendment. "A clear majority of the public continues to believe that discrimination against gay people is unjust. Two-thirds of Maine voters supported the law — they just didn't go to the polls in sufficient numbers. The vote in Maine was a small setback caused by low turnout and a disingenuous campaign by religious political activists."

**Maine is the only state in New England without a civil rights law banning sexual orientation discrimination.**

The effort to defeat the measure was grassroots-driven, with hundreds of volunteers making tens of thousands of phone calls in approximately one month's time. Tracey Conaty, NGLTF Field Organizer, worked in Maine for five weeks prior to the vote. She assisted the field program of Maine Won't Discriminate, the organization that spearheaded the effort to defeat the measure.

"Our thanks go to the hard-working gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered activists in Maine who have now faced hostile statewide ballot measures twice in just over two years," stated Lobel.

In 1995, Maine voters rejected an anti-gay ballot initiative, also crafted by religious political activists, that was designed to exclude gay people from protections in housing, employment, public accommodations and credit.

According to Birch, the radical right's ability to frame defeat

of the anti-discrimination measure as an "equality" issue (the bill would give gays "special rights") proves the need for a federal bill. "The fact that religious political groups were able to bring this issue to a vote twice within three years demonstrates why we need a single, uniform federal law to protect gay people against discrimination, particularly in employment. That's why we are continuing to press Congress to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would outlaw workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. More than 80 percent of the US electorate supports the basic fairness embodied in this bill." ▼

## Gay marriage, families under attack

Charlotte couples "tie the knot" in protest

Mark F. Johnson  
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) has released its first summary of states' legislative activity for the 1998 session, revealing that thus far a total of 24 GLBT- or HIV/AIDS- related measures have been introduced in 15 states.

Seven of the 10 unfavorable bills are against GLBT families in the form of anti-adoption and foster care, anti-domestic partnership and anti-marriage bills. Since 25 states already have laws banning same-gender marriage, gay activists are worried that right-wing legislators will shift their focus to discrediting GLBT families this year. With recent, positive gains — such as the court ruling in New Jersey giving same-gender couples equal status in adoptions — measures to counter these advancements will undoubtedly be introduced.

"Last year we made great strides in our struggle for tolerance and equality. We will work diligently to defeat these attacks and move forward a progressive family agenda," stated Kerry Lobel, NGLTF executive director.

In addition to attacks on families, at least two anti-GLBT initiatives are targeted on statewide ballots. The first was the February 10 vote in Maine to repeal a law passed last year that added sexual orientation to the state's civil rights code. By a margin of 4 percent, the law was repealed by voters. In November, Hawaii voters will decide whether to give the state legislature the power to restrict same-gender marriage. This initiative is in anticipation of an upcoming Hawaii court decision legalizing marriage in the state.

### Marriage

To date, 26 states have same-sex anti-marriage laws on the books. The New Mexico and Washington state legislatures had bills introduced this month. The New Mexico measure, a joint resolution, would put a marriage ban initiative on the November ballot. In Washington, Governor Locke vetoed that state's measure, as he did last year, but his veto was overridden by the legislature this year.

In addition, there is movement in California to put an anti-marriage measure on the statewide ballot. This effort is reportedly being spearheaded by State Senator Pete Knight. The state Attorney General's office is reviewing initiative language. Once approved, supporters of the initiative can begin gathering signatures. Life Lobby, California's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender statewide political group reports that Knight would have to collect over 400,000 valid signatures in a month to qualify for the November ballot — an unlikely feat.

In response to these ongoing assaults, on February 12, communities throughout the country marked National Freedom to Marry Day, an event designed to highlight the injus-

rice of current marriage laws. In Charlotte, a mass "wedding" was conducted by Rev. Tim Koch, pastor of New Life MCC, at Ambush. A day earlier, the club distributed "knots" for people to wear as part of the "Tie the Knot" campaign that accompanied National Freedom to Marry Day. About 12-15 couples participated in the marriage ceremony and club management estimated that approximately 100 knots were distributed.

### Civil rights

Two states, Maryland and Iowa, and the territory of Puerto Rico have measures pending that would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, credit and public accommodation. These bills are in addition to the one that was denied in Maine, now the only state in New England without a civil rights law banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

### Domestic partnership

Two states face unfavorable measures that would limit the provision of domestic partner benefits. In Georgia, a bill would prevent state and county employees from receiving domestic partner benefits by specifying "spouses and dependent children" in place of the term "dependent" in reference to employment benefits. Washington's bill would prohibit the state — including state agencies and universities — from granting domestic partnership benefits to same-sex couples. It specifically lists, but is not limited to, housing, health care and insurance. It could also be interpreted to prohibit cities, counties and some non-profit organizations that receive state funds from granting domestic partnership benefits.

In California, three favorable domestic partnership bills have been introduced. One measure, modeled after a San Francisco ordinance passed last year, would have required government contractors to provide equal benefits to employees with spouses and those with domestic partners. The measure died in committee. The other bills are still alive. One of them would allow agencies in the state pension system to voluntarily offer health benefits to partners of teachers and employees of other state and local entities. Another would require group health plans to offer domestic partners coverage on the same basis as other dependent coverage.

In Massachusetts, a favorable domestic partnership measure passed a voice vote in the state senate. The bill would give state employees domestic partnership benefits to unmarried employees and their unmarried partners. The measure now moves to the house. A domestic partnership bill has also been introduced in Puerto Rico.

### Hate crimes

South Carolina and Virginia both have hate crimes bills pending. In Virginia, the measure would add sexual orientation to the state hate crimes law. The South Carolina measure is left

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## Millennium March on Washington

by David M. Smith  
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—The nation's largest gay and lesbian political organization and the nation's largest gay, Christian denomination have announced plans to jointly sponsor a march on Washington in the spring of the year 2000. The event will be produced by veteran march organizer Robin Tyler who brought the organizations together to formulate planning.

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) are exploring dates in spring 2000 for the "Millennium March on Washington for Equal Rights," the heads of both organizations said.

Several prominent organizations have signed on as endorsers, including the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum; the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization; the National Center for Lesbian Rights; the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; the National Youth Advocacy Coalition; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; and the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. Representatives from these organizations and others will be sought to participate on an organizing committee which will help facilitate the organization and presentation of the event.

"This march will set a new tone for a new century," said

Elizabeth Birch, HRC executive director. "Full equality under the law will be our achievement in the new millennium."

"Together, we will solidify the gains we've made over the past decades and call upon our nation to live out its promise of liberty and justice for all," said Rev. Troy Perry, founder and moderator of UFMCC. "This march will set the pace for social justice and human rights."

The organizations are working closely with Tyler, an instrumental organizer/producer of the past three marches on Washington dating back to 1979, to produce the event.

"Robin's depth of experience, community commitment and unstoppable energy uniquely qualify her to lead the organizing efforts for this historic event," said Birch and Perry.

"This is an historic time in our movement. Although we have much greater visibility and a measure of cultural acceptance, we must not be lulled into a false sense of security," Tyler said. "This march will once again show the self-esteem, strength and unwavering determination of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community."

The last national march was held April 25, 1993 and, according to organizers, attracted more than 1 million people. The official figure was a source of controversy for the US Parks Department who were accused of vastly under-estimating the crowd in their count of 600,000 participants. ▼

