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OUTSIDE TRACK . TIM F. SNIDER

Charlotte H2Os splash onto the scene

That big splash you've been hearing each Saturday at noon is the sound of the HydroHomos Out Swimming — or H2Os — hitting the pool for our weekly workout at the Mecklenburg County Aquatic Center. We've been increasing our yardage, improving our strokes and having a great time together. So how did this group get started?

Several years ago I attended Atlanta's gargantuan Pride celebration. One of the many

floats in the parade carried a group of men and women dancing in Speedos. This was the float for the "Rainbow Trout," Atlanta's gay and lesbian swim team, which boasts 150 members and numerous awards from swim competitions. I said to myself, "We need something like that in Charlotte!" I had been swimming for exercise on my own but was beginning to feel that my workouts needed more rigor, more structure and the helpful hints of an experienced coach. A gay

swim team would provide all of that, plus a positive opportunity for recreation and fellowship in our community.

So, I sent an interest-seeking email to the Gay Charlotte Forum. I got a number of responses and four of us met that first Saturday in March of 2002. At first, we were pretty informal and each person swam his own workout. We focused on getting to know each other and

see TRACK on 33

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You can do it!

Partnership rights gain support

by Mark Shields

A new Gallup Poll shows six in 10 Americans support giving same-sex couples the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples "regarding healthcare benefits and Social Security survivor benefits."

The poll also shows that the country is evenly split, 49 percent in favor and 49 percent against, on allowing gay and lesbian couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of marriage. This is the strongest support to date in favor of gay and lesbian relationship recognition.

In a Gallup Poll from May 2002, 46 percent of Americans favored civil unions, while 51 percent opposed.

"Americans increasingly understand that gay and lesbian couples are just like most other American couples, and they have the same need for healthcare, social security benefits and all the other rights and protections that most Americans take for granted," said Human Rights Campaign Communications Director and Senior Strategist David M. Smith. "Gay and lesbian couples are routinely denied thousands of state and federal rights, responsibilities, protections and benefits because they have no legal marriage rights in this country."

According to an Urban Institute analysis of newly released Census 2000 data commissioned by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, families headed by same-sex couples are often, statistically speaking, a mirror image of other families in this country in terms of how many children they are raising, median income, median property value and so on.

For example, the study showed that the average same-sex couple with children in Illinois is raising 2.13 children, while other average couples are raising 1.97 children. Same-sex couples in Illinois also have the

same median household income as other couples — \$62,000.

"Studies consistently show that the similarities between gay and lesbian couples and families and the rest of the country far outweigh the differences. The thing that sets gay and lesbian Americans apart from others is the absence of legal rights and protections for our families," said Smith.

An overwhelming majority of Americans — 88 percent — support equal opportunities for gay men and lesbians in the workplace, according to the Gallup Poll. Support for ending workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation has grown tremendously since 1977, the year Gallup began polling on the issue, when only 56 percent of Americans thought homosexuals should be given equal treatment in hiring.

"In spite of the overwhelming support for equal opportunity in the workplace, it is still legal to fire someone based on their sexuality in 36 states. The time is long overdue for meaningful workplace protections for this country's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community," said HRC Political Director Winnie Stachelberg.

Finally, the new Gallup Poll showed a small majority, 54 percent, of Americans say that they believe homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, with 43 percent disagreeing. In 1982, the first year that Gallup asked a question establishing Americans' personal feelings about homosexuality, only 34 percent said they believed it was an acceptable lifestyle.

"What we see here is a steady groundswell of support for gay and lesbian Americans. As more and more gay men and lesbians come out and live their lives openly, and more Americans realize that gay people are their family, friends, co-workers and community members — they are better able to understand the issues facing the gay community," said Smith.

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