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Asheville anti-gay billboards cause controversy

Reaction from city residents split

by Scott Calvert

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — The billboard worker owed money he didn't have, so he found a way to erase his debt: He let his creditor cover six billboards with a biblical passage condemning homosexuality.

That deal backfired spectacularly, at least for the employee. Billboards are meant to be seen, after all. When sign company executives saw them a few weeks ago, they promptly fired the worker and papered over the unauthorized messages.

But many people couldn't get over the sight of a half-dozen billboards in Buncombe County coated with the Old Testament words of Leviticus 20:13:

"If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be put upon them."

Days after the message was erased, people were still talking about the episode in this vibrant mountain city of 70,000 in western North Carolina. The billboards struck a nerve that goes to the city's identity.

Asheville is indisputably in the Bible Belt, with church steeples rising from hills and hollows. At the same time it has such a large gay and lesbian population that some local residents consider it the San Francisco of the Appalachians.

The rogue billboards prompted dozens of angry calls, says Bobby Soule of Lamar Advertising. Half were from people demanding to know why the passage was displayed. The other half demanded to know why the Bible's words were taken down.

Soule says the current debate across the country over gay marriage inflamed the reaction here. "If I kept my voicemails," he says wearily, "you'd be shocked."

That passionate response doesn't surprise Tommy Kerr, author of "The Underground Asheville Guidebook."

"Asheville is very unique," he says. "I've lived in a lot of rural communities that were conservative, right wing. I've lived in communities that were the opposite. Very rarely have I lived in both at the same time.

"I love that about Asheville," he adds. "It makes it a very interesting place to live."

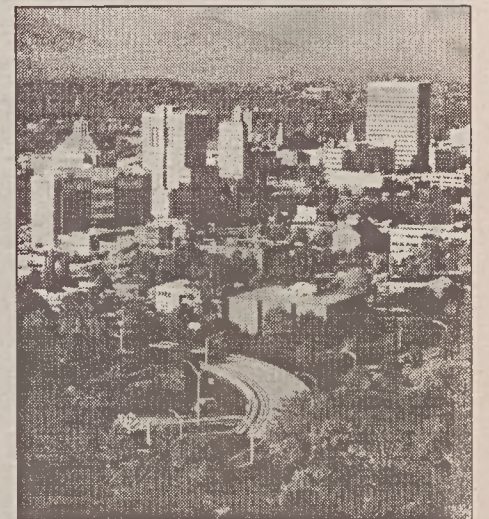
It's not just the gay community that sends conservative Christians looking to Scripture. The area has a fair number of New Age types, young hippies in dreadlocks and self-professed Wiccans.

Never mind that to reach Asheville, most people travel on a highway named for evangelist Billy Graham and end up in the city where the We Still Pray school prayer movement began.

Kerr, who is not gay or especially religious, thinks the mix works well most of the time, thanks to a tradition of tolerance that infuses the blue-tinted mountains.

A sense of independence here reaches back at least to the late 1700s when Scotch-Irish, German and other immigrant groups settled the remote hills.

And after George Vanderbilt built his Biltmore estate here in the 1890s, many



Asheville, N.C., continues to attract a growing liberal population.

artisans stayed in town and produced the Art Deco gems that give Asheville's restored downtown much of its charm.

One result, Kerr says, has been an attitude that generally accepts and appreciates creativity and differences of all sorts. Yet the influential Southern Baptists loom as a sort of check.

No one knows just how large the gay community here is. Asheville has four gay nightclubs and a lesbian-owned bookstore downtown. Several inns on the city's edge are run by and cater to gay men and lesbians.

According to the 2000 Census, the city ranked 14th nationally in the percentage of same-sex couples among all couples. But Michele Hayslett of the State Library of North Carolina says solid numbers do not exist because the census doesn't track sexual orientation.

Whatever the number, there is agreement that the gay population is thriving and growing more visible. The Rev. Alfred E. Blount says it is more common now than a few years ago to see same-sex couples holding hands.

To Allen Murray, who runs a gay support group called Closer, that is a good sign. "Two men can walk holding hands, and nobody says anything about it," he says while he sets up for a dance.

Unlike New Orleans or Atlanta, Asheville attracts many gay couples looking for a place to nest, he says. Even so, he was not surprised to hear about the billboards. "They do it all the time, constantly — Bible thumpers," says the 48-year-old Sears salesman.

Kevin Petty, a 33-year-old factory worker, bristles with anger and frustration when asked about the signs.

"How could anybody put up something like that? I'm saddened because there are stupid people in the world today," he says.

Petty told his family that he was gay three years ago, but he's selective about who he tells in Asheville. In Closer's meeting hall, though, he feels free to vent about the billboards.

"The Bible says not to judge another," he says. "Who are you to say I'm going to hell, who I'm going to bed with?"

Near midnight on a Tuesday night, Club

see **ANTI-GAY** on 7