Anti-gay billboards raise ire

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Hairspray is hopping with about 50 people. At the lesbian-oriented club, people belt out karaoke songs under a disco ball, while others play pool and smoke.

Working the front counter is Karvari Ellingson, who moved here five years ago and was surprised by the number of lesbians like her. People tell her there are 40,000 lesbians and she's starting to believe it.

"It's easier picking out the straight people than counting all the gay people," the 27-year-old says.

As she speaks, a lesbian known as Mama Red — who is something of a local celebrity — walks up. The billboards, she says, caused her no angst.

"If the biggest thing they can do is a billboard, that's pretty weak."

Soule, who says he didn't know who was behind the billboards, says he would have declined the Leviticus sign as too controversial.

If, however, someone asked for a bill-board urging people to read Leviticus, that would have been fine, he says. One bill-

Greensboro's pro-gay billboard

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and the threat to our right to equality by a proposed constitutional amendment spurred the formation of TEA (Triad Equality Alliance).

The initial inspiration occurred during a presentation last fall at the Triad Business and Professional Guild by Linda Ketner, president of South Carolina's Alliance For Full Acceptance (AFFA). Ketner offered to share AFFA's work with any LGBT group willing to raise the necessary funds. Assisted by Equality NC and encouraged by the financial backing of numerous Triad citizens - gay, lesbian and straight -TEA is the first N.C. group to take up Ketner's challenge by beginning a program to educate the general Triad public about issues facing LGBT members of the community. The group's first effort is the installation of a billboard where Business I-40 and Bypass I-40 merge just west of Greensboro. Approximately 50,000 people each day will now see the message "Gay or Straight ... all Americans deserve equal protection under the law.'

Efforts are currently under way to raise funds to extend the initial 4-month bill-board contract through the November elections. Just as the billboard idea came from AFFA, TEA also hopes to see it spread across the state and the nation.

On Apr. 23, Ketner returned to Greensboro for a presentation, during which she introduced the full media effort — bill-boards, radio and TV — that AFFA has maintained since 1998. TEA hopes to undertake a similar media program in the Triad. Inquiries regarding Ketner's presentation and/or TEA should be sent to the Triad Equality Alliance at TEA@equalityNC.org.

board seen around Asheville shows a wide cross and the words, "God loves you this much. Repent & believe."

Some churches make a point of welcoming gay parishioners. One is the Episcopal Cathedral of All Souls near Biltmore. The church's dean conducts commitment ceremonies for gay couples, and a few years ago the church kicked out a member because of his antigay rhetoric.

At some churches, pastors say they agree with the Leviticus billboard's intent but not the approach.

Blount, pastor of Tried Stone-Missionary Baptist, says, "As Christians we have to do it in a way that shows love, not hatred, showing that it's wrong, and they need help with it."

Paul Raybon, minister of education at Beverly Hills Baptist Church, questions the point of focusing on one passage.

"There are also Scriptures about not wearing clothes that are a mixture of wool and cotton," he says. "There are all kinds of laws for living; some are specific to that time."

Raybon says homosexuality is "outside Christian teaching" and therefore a sin.

"But so is gossip," he says. "We relate with gossips all the time. I have a problem with focusing on that as being the big bad sin."

This article previously appeared in the Baltimore Sun.

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