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Opinion

The South Carolina ballot battle has begun

by Ed Madden
President
SC Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement

A constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and civil unions is now headed from the South Carolina Senate to the ballot for the general election in Nov. 2006. We're 18 months out, and the battle



over gay marriage in South Carolina has already begun. And we as a community need to think seriously about what we are going to do.

It's an uphill battle (we need over 636,000 votes to win). Our community lacks the funding and the organization of our opponents. We are not out, we aren't organized and we are neither as generous nor as courageous as we are going to have to be to fight this battle.

But we can't opt out. We can't explain to future generations of gay and lesbian youth that we didn't have the energy or the courage to fight this fight.

Short-term, it's going to be very difficult. Long-term, we know we are going to win. The demographics, the polls and the long arc of justice all tell us that it's only a matter of time.

We have to remember four things.

Our Constitution is supposed to protect people, not hurt people. A constitution is made to protect basic rights. It is not a place to decide religious and personal disagreements. While we have a history of including bigotry and petty moralism in the South Carolina constitution (think miscegenation laws and mini-bottles), the constitution should not be used as a weapon to attack fellow citizens.

Marriage seems like a simple issue, but it's not. Marriage is a legal contract tied to over 1000 rights and responsibilities. Gay and lesbian families have access to few of these rights, and that access is partial,

piecemeal and private. And while it seems simple, the language of the amendment is sweeping and could have destructive unintended consequences.

We are talking about real families and real needs. While our opposition talks about unrealistic and fictional families that don't even match the reality of straight lives, we are talking about real families, real children and real needs. Over 15,000 South Carolinians registered as same-sex partners on the 2000 census. Almost 30 percent of the male couples and almost 40 percent of the female couples are raising children at home. Only when all families are secure are communities secure.

This is about basic fairness. We are simply seeking what all other South Carolinians already have: the freedom to protect our families and loved ones. Furthermore, we have to remind others that equality is never achieved through referendum — and the rights of families and children should not be subject to a vote.

Do what you can now to support the organizations involved in education and advocacy on this issue. The S.C. Gay and Lesbian Pride Movement (SCGLPM) has been at the forefront on public education, with highly successful Freedom to Marry events that received real media visibility (even coverage on National Public Radio).

The S.C. Equality Coalition has been coordinating legislative and lobbying work in the capitol and will be the critical advocacy organization in the ballot campaign. And other organizations, such as the Alliance for Full Acceptance in Charleston, the CSRA Rainbow Alliance in Aiken and PFLAG in the upstate, are also doing important educational work.

Support these organizations now. Public education matters most right now, not next year. People need information, and time to digest that information. As Nov. 2006 approaches, attitudes — and hearts — will harden. We have to do the work of putting a real face on this issue now.

And get ready for the battle ahead. We will need volunteers and donors. We will need organizers. We will need out gay and lesbian people willing to walk through neighborhoods door to door (the most effective strategy for reaching voters on this issue). And we will need to reach the hearts of 636,000 South Carolinians.

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