

Opinion

by David R. Gillespie

Fear and loathing in the Upstate

The Georgia Supreme Court has upheld an amendment, passed by Georgia voters, to the Peach State's constitution, stripping full civil rights away from a whole bunch of LGBT Georgians.

On Nov. 7, South Carolina voters are poised to do the very same thing — passing a very similar amendment — and having Georgia's high court uphold theirs doesn't bode well for ours.

This makes a concerted, cooperative effort among all concerned folks in South Carolina, gay and straight, who believe in extending the same rights and privileges of citizenship to all, regardless of who they love, all the more important.

A recent editorial cartoon that appeared on the editorial page of the *Greenville News* depicted two men dancing on an implied Broadway stage holding a newspaper with the headline announcing the recent court setback to gay marriage in New York. The caption of the cartoon was, "If we can't make it here, we can't make it anywhere."

Offensive? Possibly. True? Most likely and unfortunately so.

The LGBT community in the midlands and lower part of the state seem to have their act together. They are pulling together, sharing resources, giving time and energy and money to the effort to defeat the "dumb amendment." One Charleston resident has even offered a matching grant of up to \$100,000 to aid in the effort to stop the amendment.

But when it comes to the Upstate of South Carolina, the same dedication, concern, effort or rallying to keep our state from stealing our rights as citizens doesn't seem to be visible.

Recently, the South Carolina Equality Coalition (SCEC) put together a bus tour of cities in the state as part of its Fairness for All Families campaign. In Greenville, the small but dedicated group stood on the corner of South Main and Augusta with signs urging people to vote for fairness. Where were we?

A search of MySpace.com profiles for males and females, ages 18-65, within 10 miles of my zip code, who identify as gay, lesbian, bi or not sure, resulted in 961 profiles.

Surely, some of those 961 people, who have a vested interest in securing equal rights for all South Carolina citizens, could have joined in that effort. Where were we?



Are we simply content to go to the Castle, Red Moon or Sugar Shack, drink, have fun, have sex and then never consider what's being done to us in the

name of family values? Where are we?

Now, granted, there may be some reasons for doing nothing, for staying in comfortable little closets and keeping one's "good name" in the neighborhood or the business community. Fear and loathing come to mind immediately.

Maybe we've lived in the shadow of that phallic symbol at the gate of Bob Jones University for so long we just can't get it out of our collective consciousness. Maybe the power of the religious right in the Upstate is only what we, in our fear, give to them.

Maybe we're just so used to wallowing in the self-loathing guilt and shame that for so long was a part of our lives (thanks to parents, friends, schools and churches). After all, we southerners do love our guilt. Maybe some of us still really do feel dirty because we have sex with members of our own gender.

I understand both the fear and the loathing. They are difficult to throw off.

Gay, lesbian, trans, bi, queer and questioning; straight but not narrow, PFLAGers, progressive church members — all concerned need to join with the SCEC and Fairness For All Families and the Alliance for Full Acceptance and other groups behind this campaign if there is even to be a ghost of a chance to defeat the proposed amendment. More than 600,000 votes are needed to do so.

The fight ahead will be a tough one. The political director of the Palmetto State's GOP has made it clear that this amendment will be an issue. Oran Smith's Palmetto Family Council and that organization's South Carolina Marriage Project are formidable foes.

But guaranteed success has never been the overarching reason to fight for a cause (The Art of War notwithstanding).

Win or lose, South Carolina needs to know that the state's LGBT residents would not be happy to have their rights stripped away.

Win or lose, South Carolina needs to know that families come in all shapes and sizes, that committed relationships (whether or not they are sanctioned by the church) are valuable and good for the state.

Win or lose, South Carolina needs to know that discrimination and oppression are tools of evil men and women who have their own internalized fears and insecurities to deal with and have no place in the life of the state today. ▀



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Directions

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