

EqualityNC lays plan for legislative session

Group to focus on safe schools bill, prevent anti-gay marriage amendment

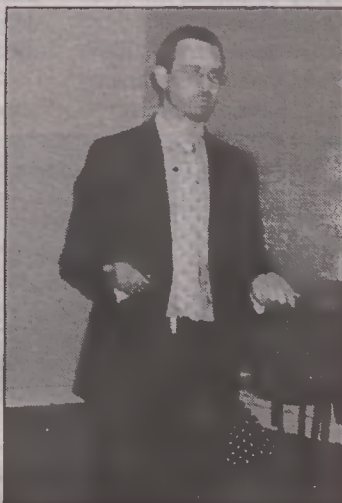
by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

CHARLOTTE/RALEIGH — Less than a month after the start of the 2009-2010 biennial legislative session, the statewide LGBT advocacy group EqualityNC is reaching out to local communities as they lay plans for achieving equality this year.

In a town hall meeting with LGBT community members in Charlotte, ENC Executive Director Ian Palmquist and Grassroots Coordinator Rebecca Mann outlined their plans to focus on safe schools legislation, stopping an anti-gay, anti-family marriage amendment, passing a non-discrimination bill for state employees, repealing the state's Crimes Against Nature statute and saving HIV/AIDS prevention funding from possible cuts in the state budget.

As in the last legislative session, the group's main focus will remain on the School Violence Prevention Act. Originally introduced to the legislature in 2007, the bill narrowly passed the N.C. House with protections for LGBT students. The bill was later stripped of its enumerated categories in the Senate and after a conference committee restored the protections, the Senate failed to re-approve the document.

"We came just so unbelievably close to getting it through last year," Palmquist told community members. He said he expects the bill to be introduced in the next few weeks. It will be co-sponsored in the Senate by Sen. Julia Boseman, the state's only openly LGBT legislator and Sen. Charlie Albertson.



EqualityNC Executive Director Ian Palmquist speaks to community members at the main branch of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

Photo Credit: Matt Comer

Palmquist said their toughest fight will be in the Senate, whose members traditionally shy away from controversial subjects.

"We have to show the Senate there is support and enthusiasm for this bill," he said. According to a 2008 poll conducted by Public Policy Polling, 72 percent of those surveyed support the passage of a school anti-bullying bill with provisions specifically protecting students on the basis of sexual orientation.

"It is good to know where legislators stand and what their particular issues and concerns

are," said Mann, who is working with constituents and urging them to speak to their state senators and representatives.

Palmquist said many elected officials are concerned over the politics on the issue and how it might impact them come election time.

"No one who voted in favor of this bill in 2008 lost their election due to this issue," he said. "In fact, the bill came up in only one race and it received no traction and the incumbent won."

He added, "Some politicians are seeing that voting for the bill has political consequences. We want them to see that not supporting the bill carries consequences, too."

EqualityNC will also be working to prevent the passage of an anti-LGBT, anti-family marriage amendment. The religious right has worked harder than ever to organize efforts to see an amendment pushed through the legislature.

"Once again the right wing is trying to amend our constitution to end access to marriage and a host of other relationship recognition for same-sex couples including domestic partner benefits," Palmquist said. "We're seeing a much more organized push from the right wing this year."

The coalition NC4Marriage, supported by groups like the N.C. Family Policy Council and Christian Action League, is planning a "Marriage Sunday" on Feb. 22. Churches across the state will preach on "traditional marriage" and homosexuality and urge congregants to attend a March 3 rally at the N.C. Legislative

Building organized by the Winston-Salem-based Return America. The Rev. Ron Baity of Berean Baptist Church is the principal organizer behind Return America.

Palmquist said his group will work to keep North Carolina the only state in the Southeastern U.S. without a constitutional amendment discriminating against LGBT citizens. He also hopes the state can make history by passing the School Violence Prevention Act; if it passes, it will be the first time a bill inclusive of protections based on sexual orientation and gender-identity is approved by the General Assembly. ▀

info: www.equalitync.org

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