

Historians trace road to gay marriage

by David Stout
david@gonotes.com

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — A unique 15-session miniconference addressing "Historical Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage" will be a highlight of the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), scheduled to take place here January 7-10. The 125-year-old nonprofit, which boasts 14,000 members, is dedicated to strengthening the practice and teaching of history by promoting historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical objects and the dissemination of historical research.

The miniconference sessions will involve some of the leading figures in historical research, including former UNC-Greensboro Professor John D'Emilio, author of such books as "Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970" and "Lost Prophet: Bayard Rustin and the Quest for Peace and Justice in America." D'Emilio founded a chapter of the Gay Academic Union in Greensboro in 1978 that later spawned the Triad Business and Professional Guild.

Other presenters of note include Blanche Wiesen Cooke, Michael Grossberg, Ramón Gutiérrez, Alice Kessler Harris, Linda Kerber and many others who will address a diverse range of topics related to the changing definition of marriage, domestic unions and family throughout history. The sessions are open to the public, and the AHA will publish their findings in 2010.

"One theme that emerges across this diverse range of miniconference panels is that marriage is not a static institution," said AHA president and Harvard University

Professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. "The Puritans were actually marriage innovators, introducing marriage as a civil contract rather than a sacrament in the 17th Century, and permitting divorce. In this century, it was not until 1949 that the California State Supreme Court struck down racial restrictions on marriage in the state, and not until 1967 that the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated those restrictions for the country as a whole. We can argue about what marriage should be today... but we cannot argue that marriage has always been the same."

For more than a decade the issue of marriage equality and partnership recognition has been the subject of ongoing social and political debate both in the United States and overseas, with various courts, legislatures and ballot referenda taking different approaches and developing different responses to the question of what constitutes a "marriage." Differing civil and religious views of marriage and family will be addressed in this series of panels intended to bring historical perspectives to the discussion of marriage equality.

The miniconference was developed by the AHA Working Group for Historical Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage. Among the issues to be addressed in the 15-session miniconference are:

- Marriage politics in the 21st Century United States
- Perspectives of different groups who have been denied access to marriage, including gay and lesbian people, the disabled, racial groups and the poor

- How the issues of gay marriage and gays in the military have intertwined
- How social institutions, including governments, communities and churches have sought to influence, define and regulate inter-ethnic marriages
- Relationships between historical and legal arguments in legal cases addressing same-sex marriage

"Californians have been involved in an ongoing debate about marriage equality since the State Supreme Court granted, and Proposition 8 rescinded, the right to same-sex marriage," said AHA Executive Director Arnita Jones. "AHA members wanted to contribute to this conversation by doing what historians do best — sharing research and perspectives on how these issues have evolved throughout history. With this year's special miniconference, we hope to add the power of historical perspective to the global conversation on marriage equality."

"The Working Group for Historical Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage seeks to set the issue in broad historical perspective: chronologically, geographically and thematically," said Working Group Chair and University of Southern California Professor of History and American Studies and Ethnicity Karen Halttunen. "Supporters of Proposition 8 argue that the initiative restored the historically consistent definition of marriage. This miniconference challenges this ill-informed idea by presenting a history that does justice to the complexity of human experience over time."

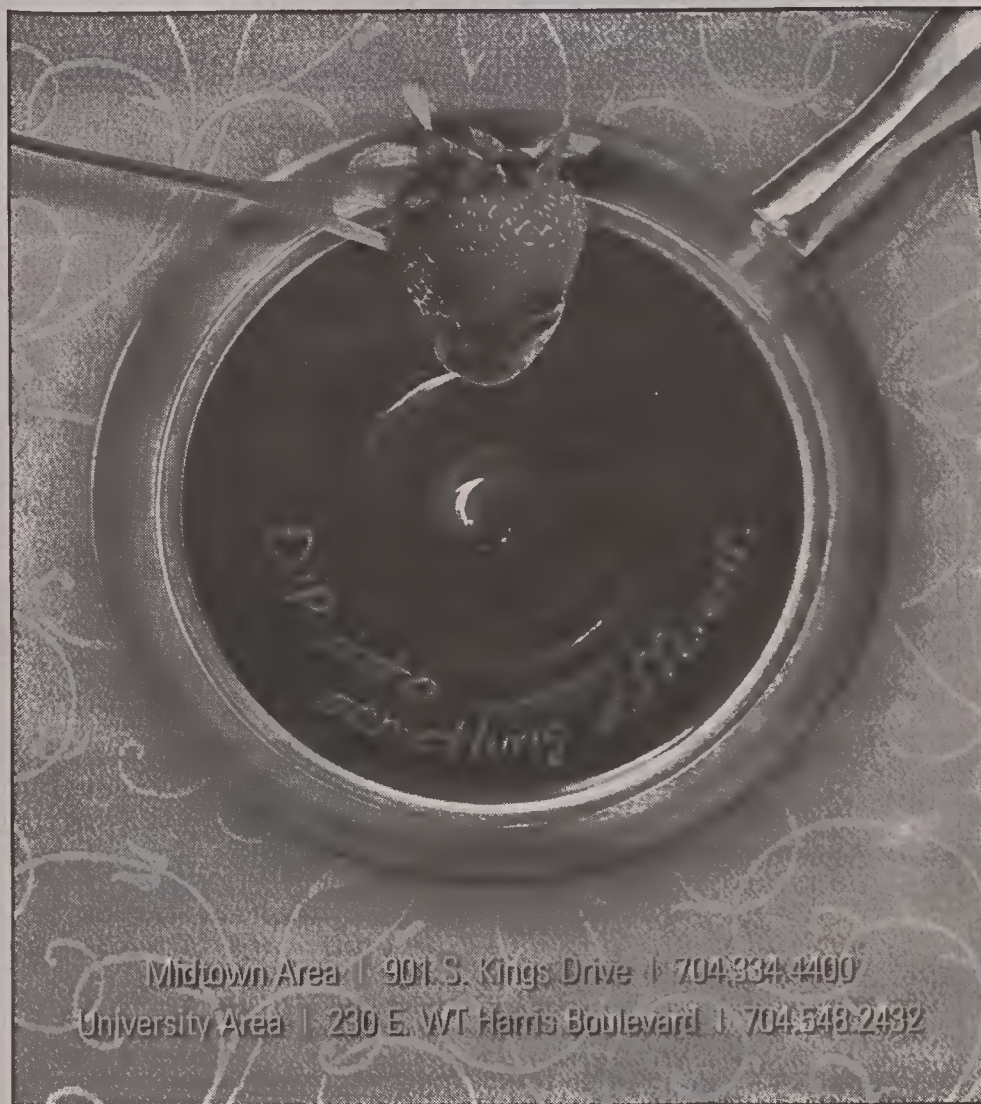
SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — In contravention of a ruling by the chief judge of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, the federal Office of Personnel Management has instructed insurer Blue Cross-Blue Shield not to extend benefits to a married lesbian court employee's spouse.

SHREVEPORT, La. — In December, Shreveport City Council members unanimously voted to add sexual orientation and gender identity protections to the city's nondiscrimination ordinance.

NEW YORK, N.Y. — Talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres (who became a vegan in 2008) and style guru Tim Gunn (creative director at fur-free Liz Claiborne Inc., and narrator of PETA's anti-fur video "Fashion Victims") have been named PETA's 2009 Woman of the Year and Man of the Year.

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — The murder of gay teen Jorge Steven Lopez Mercado may be the first case to be prosecuted under the newly enacted federal hate crimes law. Assistant A.G. for the Justice Dept.'s civil rights division, Thomas Perez told media the government is focusing closely on the case.

MEXICO CITY, Mexico — Mexico City has become the first Latin American city to pass a marriage equality bill. As part of the 39-20 vote, lawmakers also lifted the ban on allowing LGBT couples to adopt children, apply for joint loans and be included in spousal insurance policies — all protections once denied under city civil union laws. President Felipe Calderon's party has vowed to challenge the law in court. ::



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