

Gay Republican Addresses State Conference Despite Rumblings

People attending the recent NC Gay and Lesbian Conference at NC State University in Raleigh heard California gay Republican activist Frank Ricchiazzi urge them to get involved in politics within their political parties to help dispel myths and fears about gays and to work for their civil rights.

The three-day conference convened on March 30, and drew nearly 100 people from throughout North Carolina and some from Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. In addition to the keynote speech by Ricchiazzi, weekend events included lectures and workshops by several national and state gay figures and evening entertainment by comic Robin Tyler and North Carolina musicians.

GAY REPUBLICANS CANCEL SPEECH

The keynote speech by a gay Republican provided the only controversy for the Conference. It seems that pressure from David Flaherty, NC Republican Party chair, caused the original keynote speaker, Robert Roehr, to cancel at the last minute. Roehr is president of the Capital Area Republicans club in Washington, DC, a part-time fundraiser for the Republican National Committee (RNC), and a member of the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign in Washington.

In a brief statement released to conference organizers on Friday, the first day of the conference, Roehr said conference publicity "misrepresented" him as appearing as an official of the RNC and that the publicity caused "difficulty for myself, the party, and its candidates." He said he had agreed to speak "as a private citizen, not as a representative of the Republican National Party."

In an interview with the gay newspaper The Washington Blade, Roehr said that there "was concern on the part of the party and at least one of our candidates down there as to my appearance," but he said he had no "first-hand" knowledge of which candidate that was. (The Washington Blade, April 6, 1984).

Joe Herzenberg and Lightning Brown, two of the conference organizers, told the Blade two press releases had been sent out that included identification of Roehr's RNC and Reagan-Bush '84 affiliations. The information was from a vitae Roehr provided them.

Brown said he believes the trouble began when a reporter called Flaherty for comment on Roehr's appearance before a gay group. Brown told the Blade, "My

presumption is that somehow Mr. Flaherty got involved and wanted to stop any gay Republicans from coming into the state to talk to people."

Flaherty, in a phone interview with the Blade, said he learned from a newspaper account that "someone from the RNC and the Reagan re-election committee was coming to talk to a gay group." He said he called the RNC national office and spoke with chief-of-staff Bill Phillips and "just asked" for verification of Roehr's affiliations. Flaherty maintains he did not put pressure on Phillips to have Roehr cancel his speech and did not know that Roehr was gay.

"If I could have, I would have been more than anxious to have them think twice [about allowing Roehr to speak before the group] because it's contrary to what our party position is. We support strong family values," said Phillips according to the Blade.

Bill Greener, communications director for the RNC, said it was "inaccurate" for conference organizers to portray Roehr as an RNC official but said it was Roehr's own decision to cancel the speech.

Roehr was the second gay Republican to cancel as keynoter. Former Maryland Congressman Robert Bauman also declined, saying his appearance at the NC conference could hurt the re-election efforts of his "personal friend" Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who is in a heated contest with Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt.

CALIFORNIA GAY REPUBLICAN KEYNOTER

In a last-minute scramble for a speaker, conference organizers secured Frank Ricchiazzi, chair of the Republican Party in California's 55th Assembly District, which includes part of Los Angeles. He is also vice president of the Log Cabin Club, an organization of gay Republicans.

Ricchiazzi spoke of his 1982 race for the California Assembly. He said he heard some negative comments as word spread that he was gay, but through discussions with party members some people realized "the gay issue was not the issue that would affect that election."

Though he lost the race, he won 32 percent of the vote in a district that is only 21 percent Republican.

He said that the California Democratic party took the gay vote for granted. But his race "showed that if the Republican Party would offer somebody who would be open to the gay community, the gay community would not stay in one party."

Ricchiazzi also described the important influence of gay Republicans in the passage of AB-1, the bill which would have outlawed job discrimination against gays in California. The state's Assembly and Senate narrowly passed the bill, but Gov. George Deukmejian vetoed the measure in March. Ricchiazzi vowed to secure passage of the measure again and to again put the legislation on the governor's desk.

Ricchiazzi reiterated the need for gays to get involved in electoral politics to educate and break stereotypes.

"To all of you who are Republican, the Republican Party belongs to me...and to you. It does not belong to a Jesse Helms or an H.L. Richardson. And we're going to fight them!"

LIBERTARIAN & DEMOCRATIC REBUTTALS

Jere Real, A Virginia free-lance writer and former member of the Libertarian

(see REPUBLICAN on page 10)



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