

STATE & NATIONAL NEWS

Gays in the government?

Chapel Hill hosts conference for gay public officials

by Doug Ferguson

From Toronto to Austin, San Diego to Miami, they converged on the Carolina Inn on the heels of a national election that seemed to spell victory for America's lesbian and gay community.

More than 75 openly gay and lesbian elected and appointed officials traveled to Chapel Hill on the weekend of Nov. 20-22 to discuss the 1992 election, which put in office the most supportive president in the history of the United States. They also gathered to learn from one another's successes and failures as some of the most visible members of this nation's invisible minority.

The Eighth Annual International Conference of Lesbian and Gay Officials, its participants ranging from members of Congress to school board representatives, featured fund

raisers, dinners, planning sessions and seminars. It was hosted by openly gay Chapel Hill Town Council member Joe Herzenberg and Mike Nelson, executive director of the NC. Pride PAC for Lesbian and Gay Equality.

Nelson said he believes the conference was a huge success. "People left the conference with a sense of shared purpose. It was a time to share their experiences as openly gay and lesbian elected officials."

Nelson added that planning sessions also benefited the conference goers by suggesting strategies for re-election and for maintaining good media relations. And for those attending the conference who were interested in seeking office for the first time, information on running a successful campaign was provided. Nelson said such political participation is essential for gays and lesbians to make signifi-

cant gains.

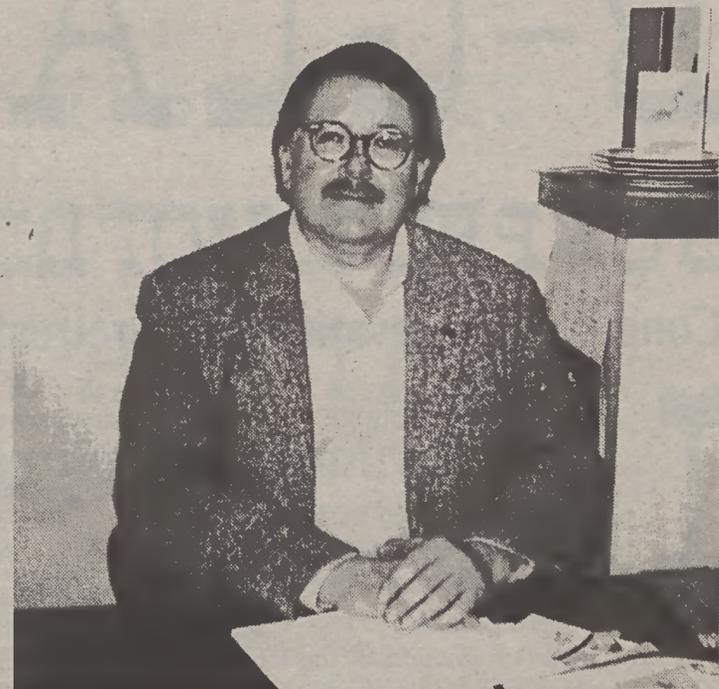
"The only way for us to achieve our equal rights is to get involved in the political process and to elect people who support our rights," he said. "And we can fight better for our own rights than anyone else can."

Herzenberg agreed that the formal aspects of the conference were important sources of information for those in attendance, but he pointed out that much was also gained from casual conversation during free time.

"We cut out some of the meetings from past years so that people could have a chance to talk with each other a little more," Herzenberg said.

"People had complained before that they never had enough time to get to know one another, he said. "Having more free time really worked out well."

Chapel Hill Mayor Ken



Kathy Staley/Lambda

Chapel Hill Town Council member Joe Herzenberg is the only openly gay elected official in North Carolina.

Broun and Carrboro Mayor Eleanor Kinnaird were among the area leaders who addressed the conference. Both leaders said they were happy to play host to the conference and that they supported the group's goals.

"Chapel Hill has a long history of interest in protecting the rights of all people," Broun said in an interview this month.

"I think it's symbolically important that we had the meeting here."

1992: THE QUEER YEAR IN REVIEW

by Mike Hefner

The past year saw the issue of lesbian and gay rights enter the political mainstream in an unprecedented way. This focus was mostly the result of efforts by the Christian right to reverse gains made in recent years by the lesbian and gay civil rights movement. These efforts ranged from anti-gay rights initiatives and referendums in several cities and states to the anti-gay "family values" rhetoric at the Republican National Convention.

The presidential race

In 1992, the candidates for president focused on lesbian and gay rights more than in any previous race, with all three major candidates openly stating their position. Bill Clinton made clear his support for lesbian and gay rights throughout the campaign, as did most of the other Democratic candidates. But Clinton made a special effort to court the gay vote. The measures in Oregon and Portland were

defeated, with 56 percent and 57 percent of votes against the measures, respectively. The Colorado and Tampa measures passed with 53 percent and 58 percent of the vote, respectively.

Oregon's Measure 9

Oregon's Measure 9 was the most far-reaching of the ballot measures in 1992. It would have amended the Oregon state constitution to prohibit state and municipal governments from using their funds or properties to "promote, encourage, or facilitate homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism or masochism," or to recognize homosexuals as a group to be protected from discrimination. It would also have directed Oregon public schools and universities to teach that homosexuality is "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse."

The effects that such a measure might have had are difficult to assess due to the vague language. It could be interpreted to bar homosexuals

from any state-licensed profession, prohibit any organization, church or company with anti-discrimination policies from using public facilities and require libraries to remove all gay-positive books from their shelves.

Measure 9 was placed on the ballot by the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), a far-right group which has sponsored anti-gay and anti-abortion rights measures in the past. In 1988, they sponsored Measure 8, which overturned an order banning anti-gay employment discrimination in state government issued by Governor Neil Goldschmidt. (Measure 8 was ruled unconstitutional by the Oregon Court of Appeals on Nov. 12, 1992 on the grounds that it violated state employees' free speech rights.)

The campaign in Oregon was the most bitter in the country. Many groups opposing Measure 9 were the targets of vandalism and harassment. The No On 9 Campaign and Out-PAC, two political groups

that worked to oppose the measure, had their offices vandalized and their mailing lists stolen. People on those lists later received threatening phone calls. The Portland Metropolitan Community Church, which serves the gay and lesbian community, was vandalized and had their membership roster stolen. St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Portland was also vandalized with anti-gay slogans such as "Catholics love gays," "Vote Yes on 9," and "Kill faggots" after the local Catholic Church announced their opposition to Ballot Measure 9.

Colorado's Amendment 2

Amendment 2, the ballot measure passed in Colorado, seems to have been successful because it avoided the harsh language of Oregon Measure 9. Instead, it forbids "homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation" from being the basis of any "minority status, quota preferences, protected status, or claim of discrimination." This language enabled Colorado for Family Values, the amendment's sponsor, to

frame the issue in terms of quotas and "special rights for gays" while hiding the fact that it removed all protections against anti-gay discrimination.

This tactic proved very effective. In one poll immediately after the election, more than one in five of those who said they voted for Amendment 2 also said they were in favor of gays and lesbians being protected from discrimination in housing and employment.

The amendment will overturn existing anti-discrimination laws in Denver, Boulder and Aspen. Those cities have joined the ACLU, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund in a lawsuit challenging the amendment's constitutionality under the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution.

The passage of Amendment 2 has led to a growing nationwide boycott of Colorado. National gay organizations such

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