

Adopt-A-Highway SALGA Addresses Safety Issue

In a letter to North Carolina Secretary of Transportation Thomas Harrelson, the Southern Appalachian Lesbian and Gay Alliance (SALGA) has stated that it will stand by its decision to have a sign identifying the group's stretch of highway, and suggests strategies by which the state can effectively address its concerns for the safety of gay and lesbian people.

The letter is SALGA's response to Harrelson's expression of concern for the safety of SALGA members, and to his reiteration of a request that SALGA not identify the stretch of highway assigned to them in the state's Adopt-A-Highway Program.

SALGA applied for participation in the Adopt-A-Highway program in October of 1989. Community groups participating in North Carolina's Adopt-A-Highway program agree to pick up litter along a 2-mile stretch of highway assigned to them by the state. In return, the state posts a sign identifying the group.

The state responded to SALGA's application by saying that SALGA could

participate in the program, but could not place a sign with the group's name on their stretch of highway. The state gave as its main reason for the denial of a sign its concern for the safety of SALGA members.

SALGA then sued the state for the right to participate fully in the program, i.e., with an identifying sign. The suit was filed by the NCCLU on behalf of SALGA.

SALGA and the state Department of Transportation (NCDOT) reached an out-of-court settlement in July in which the State of North Carolina agreed that SALGA will be allowed to participate fully in the North Carolina Adopt-A-Highway Program, "under the same terms and conditions applicable to other participants in the program" (wording used in the settlement).

Following the out-of-court settlement, Harrelson wrote to SALGA, once again urging the group to not post a sign identifying their stretch of highway.

The following is SALGA's response:



Mr. Thomas J. Harrelson
N.C. Secretary of Transportation
N.C. Department of Transportation
P.O. Box 25201
Raleigh, NC 27611-5201

Dear Mr. Harrelson:

Thank you for your letter of July 18. After considering your request [that SALGA not put up an identifying sign], we must inform you that we stand by our original decision to participate fully in the Adopt-A-Highway program. As stipulated in our settlement agreement, our sign should read "S. Appalachian Lesbian and Gay Alliance." Since it is apparent to us that you do not fully understand why the Southern Appalachian Lesbian and Gay Alliance (SALGA) could not accept the restrictions originally imposed on us by your department, we would like to take this opportunity to clarify our position.

Although we relied on the First Amendment of the federal constitution as the surest way to prevail in our request, we believe our case to have as much merit in issues beyond the one of free speech. As you may know, the accepted scientific consensus is

that a person's sexual/affectional orientation is as basic, unintentional, and innate to that person's identity as his/her national origin, color, or gender. Thus, it is not only unfair, but also grossly inaccurate, to liken sexual/affectional orientation to such personal choices as religion, political beliefs, social opinions, etc. Like women and ethnic minorities, lesbians and gay men suffer discrimination, harassment, even violence, on a routine basis because of a personal attribute over which the only choice we have is to attempt to hide it.

The Fourteenth Amendment of the United States constitution guarantees one thing to all citizens--equal protection of the law. Unfortunately, history shows that those who as a group are different from the majority, have had a difficult time making that constitutional promise a practical fact. For lesbians and gay Americans, unequal protection of the law is the daily reality of our lives. Since 1969, we have engaged in a struggle to change that reality by obtaining for ourselves that protection that the civil rights laws of the United States afford all other minorities. SALGA is fully committed to that struggle. Our membership believes that to win the right to speak our name in public is a significant step towards our full inclusion in the life of the community. Just as important, while our motives for "adopting" a stretch of highway are our sense of civic responsibility and a concern for the environment, we also know that lesbians and gay men make invaluable contributions to our society every day; a fact many prefer to ignore. SALGA does not wish to contribute to the regular devaluing of lesbian and gay people by agreeing to make yet another contribution on an anonymous basis.

We greatly appreciate your concern for our safety. It would be naive of us not to share it to a certain extent. Gay and lesbian North Carolinians live in a state that leads the nation in documented cases of hate-motivated violence towards us. Nonetheless, we believe that rights won at the courthouse can be largely meaningless unless they are enforced. The experience of African-Americans teaches us that the repeal of Jim Crow gained its significance only after the Freedom Riders were willing to take the risks necessary to enforce it.

Finally, your letter seems to be asking us to prevent potential acts of violence by urging us not to "identify" ourselves; as if we were causing others to break the law. We believe it is unfair and inappropriate to ask the potential victims of criminal violence not to cause others to engage in criminal conduct, especially when that cause is nothing more than the lawful exercise of a constitutional right. We would like to offer three strategies we believe to be effective and efficient in addressing your concern for our safety. First, SALGA believes the appropriate way to combat specific acts of hate-motivated violence is the vigorous prosecution of the perpetrators, not the silencing of their victims. Second, repeal of the Crime Against Nature statute; an obsolete law whose only practical use is the marginalization of lesbian and gay North Carolinians in a manner that makes violence against us acceptable. Third, we urge you, the Governor, and all of the state's public leadership to use your considerable influence to promote an environment of safety and justice for all North Carolinians by speaking out forcefully and unequivocally against all forms of prejudice, hatred, and bigotry. [emphasis added]

We look forward to joining other civic and community groups in helping keep North Carolina's highways clean and beautiful!

Sincerely,

Teri Gibbs
Immediate Past Chairperson

Carlos Gomez
Chairperson

Dykes To Watch Out For



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