

The Front Page

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The Case of the Vanishing Republicans.

Although no direct intervention is evident, the mere spectre of Jesse Helms and the Congressional Club was apparently enough to keep two gay Republicans from speaking at the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Conference on March 31. Former Maryland Congressman Robert Bauman, as previously covered in *The Front Page* (Vol. 5, No. 4), was the first to decline, saying that his appearance before the group could hurt the reelection efforts of his "personal friend" Jesse Helms. Bob Roehr, president of the Capital Area Republicans (CAR, a gay organization), was the second.

On Friday morning, the day the conference was scheduled to begin, organizers received a panicked phone call from Roehr cancelling his scheduled keynote address. Unlike Bauman, Roehr had formally agreed to appear and had already accepted payment. In a letter dated March 12, he said "It is a pleasure to accept your invitation to speak. . . [My speech] will be titled 'Gays and the Republican Party' and it will last twenty to twenty-five minutes. Two brief rebuttals will follow, representing Democratic and Libertarian perspectives, and then questions from the floor."

"I have enclosed a standard resume," he continued, "an additional sheet of gay-related accomplishments, some clippings and testimony about some of the activities of the Capital Area Republicans. Hope it can be of some help. . ." He enclosed his work number as a place he could be reached, and added "I look forward to visiting Raleigh." When he phoned on March 30, however, he said that conference publicity emphasizing his speech had caused "difficulty for myself, the party, and its candidates."

After several phone calls to known gay Republicans, conference organizers finally secured the vice-president of the Log Cabin Republican Club of Los Angeles and chairman of the Republican Party in California's 55th District, Frank Ricchiazzi. He caught an overnight flight from Los Angeles, and arrived in time to give the keynote address on Saturday afternoon, speaking principally about his experiences as a quietly-but-openly gay candidate for the California Assembly two years ago. The necessary expense of flying him out, however, forced conference organizers to go seriously over budget and will require future fund-raising efforts to clear the debt.

As an excuse for his canceling, Roehr said that conference publicity "misrepresented"

him as appearing as "an official" of the Republican National Committee (RNC). Although he does work for them, part-time in fund-raising, Roehr said that he had agreed to speak "as a private citizen, not as a representative of the Republican National Committee."

The majority of the publicity that went out to the non-gay media, written by Don King, only listed Roehr as president of CAR. Items about the conference which appeared in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, the *Charlotte Observer*, and the *North Carolina Independent* made no mention of his employment. There seemed to be little interest among the non-gay media in covering the event.

Two days before the conference, organizer Lightning Brown called on several Triangle reporters personally to convince them to attend. He took with him a two-page summary of the conference and its speakers, which included a standard press release. Using information from Roehr's resume, sent to the conference by Roehr himself, the press release identified the scheduled keynote speaker as a "staff member of the Republican National Committee" (not "an official") and "a member of the Reagan-Bush campaign committee in Washington."

In an interview with Lisa M. Keen of *The Washington Blade*, Brown said that he assumed Roehr's employment at RNC "was open information." Another organizer, Joe Herzenberg, said that while it was true Roehr had not given the conference permission to identify his affiliations with the RNC, "he didn't say not to."

Both Brown and Herzenberg said that they believe pressure for Roehr to cancel his speech originated with the state Republican Party. In response, Roehr told the *Blade* 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.

"My own impression is that some Republicans felt that having a gay Republican appear [at the conference] was not in the best interest of the Republican Party here," Herzenberg commented. Brown said he believes the trouble began when a local reporter called the state Republican Party chair, David Flaherty, for a comment on Roehr's appearance before the conference.

"My presumption is that somehow Mr. Flaherty got involved and wanted to stop any

"The gay movement has almost totally been identified not only with the left, but with the radical left. I think one of the virtues of my presence and the presence of others, if we can drag them out kicking and screaming, is that (it shows) being gay has no boundaries."

— Robert Bauman

gay Republicans from coming into the state to talk to people."

The reporter was apparently Ann Devlin, of WRAL-TV in Raleigh (where Jesse Helms was vice-president prior to running for office), who anchors the 11 o'clock news on weekends. She was one of the reporters to whom Brown gave his news release and, in an interview with *The Front Page*, Devlin confirmed that she had called Flaherty to confirm Roehr's credentials.

Flaherty, according to her, said that he would have to check and call her back. He did but made no mention of having any problems with Roehr's speaking. According to Herzenberg, Devlin seemed genuinely surprised when she arrived with a cameraman to find that Roehr had cancelled. Nevertheless, she did a short report on the conference that evening, which included comments from Brown.

Flaherty, in a phone interview with the *Blade*, said that he learned from a newspaper account that "someone from the Republican National Committee and the Reagan reelection committee was coming to talk to a gay group." (*There was no such newspaper story — ed.*) He said he called the RNC's Washington office and spoke to RNC chief-of-staff Bill Phillips and "just asked" if Roehr was in fact affiliated with the RNC and the Reagan-Bush campaign. Flaherty, who said he "didn't put any pressure" on Phillips to have Roehr cancel his speech, 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 conference] because it's contrary to what our party position is. We support strong family values." Flaherty said that while Roehr's appearance would not have hurt the Republican Party in North Carolina, to have any RNC or Reagan-Bush campaign official speak to a gay conference "could have confused people."

Earlier this year, Flaherty told the *Wilmington Star*: "One of the big things we're going to make an issue [to] get people to vote for this year is to . . . establish that, hey, who's supporting the Democrats? We'll show the Jesse Jacksons, we'll show the gay rights, we'll show the Bella Abzugs, and we'll show the special interest groups — the Socialist Workers and all of them — the labor unions — and then we're going to say, 'Are these the people you want to elect your president? Do you agree with them? If not, vote Republican.' And that has very real appeal. . . the Democrats can't run an ad against our special-interest groups — pro-prayer, pro-life, Moral Majority. You can't throw rocks at those. We can throw rocks at the gays, at the liberals, at the labor unions. . ."

Bill Greener, communications director for RNC, speaking on behalf of RNC chief-of-staff Bill Phillips, told the *Blade* that it was "innaccurate" for the conference organizers to portray Roehr as an RNC official, but said Roehr's decision to cancel his speech was one Roehr made himself.

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