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Ellen Gerber of High Point. Johnson gave the audience tips to help ensure that the documents they draw up for same-sex couples will withstand legal proceedings. He also emphasized the importance of using wills to protect assets that otherwise might be distributed without regard for a long-term lesbian or gay partner.

Gerber's presentation of ways to gain legal footing for same-sex couples included various types of powers of attorney, living wills and joint ownership of property. Somewhat unexpectedly, this portion of the seminar drew some of most pointed questions from the audience and provoked quite a bit of discussion by the group.

The day's last speaker, attorney Anita Hodgkiss of Charlotte, gave an overview of the CAN law, and told the audience of the ways police have used the law to harass gay men. She described police tactics of initiating conversations with men in public places like city parks, getting increasingly graphic and often asking "What do you like?" and rubbing their crotches, all in an effort to get men to say something that can be used to support charges of solicitation. Hodgkiss said that police have even charged men with simple assault for touching an undercover officer's arm or knee.

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Hodgkiss said she has had clients who have pled guilty to the allegations just to avoid trial, and that few have ever received active jail time. She also said she's had clients who are willing to go to trial, and that in almost every case, the charges have been dropped either because district attorneys aren't interested in prosecuting the charges or because "no officer wants to get on the stand and admit he was afraid" of clients charged with simple assault.

Attendees of the seminar received continuing education credit from the NC State Bar along with a wealth of information. Most members of the audience were enthusiastic about the success of the seminar. "I'm really pleased with the attendance," attorney Mary Guy Mendini of Durham said. "This is by far the most interesting CLE seminar I've ever been to."

Evan Wolfson agreed. "The work NC-GALA is doing is critical to our movement. This kind of turn-out is very exciting."

"I was interested in forming this organization to give us a way to get together and teach each other about different aspects of North Carolina law," Sharon Thompson said. "I think that happened really well today."

Connie Vetter, the chair of the NC-GALA Publicity Committee and founder of the Southern Center for Law & Justice, said she was excited about the number of organization members and conference attendees. "There are so many lesbian and gay attorneys in this state, but we don't have many ways to meet and talk. NC-GALA and seminars like this will help us stay in contact with each other and help us make the legal system work for us for a change.

"This is an important time for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community," John Boddie said, "and I think legal issues like the Hawaii marriage case make it critical that attorneys work together to secure and protect our rights. That's why I'm glad this seminar was such a success."

Boddie said NC-GALA is planning its next CLE seminar for late April, and that Dixon Osburn of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is expected to be the guest speaker.

NC-GALA was established last September to provide a forum for interested attorneys to network and to discuss legal issues that affect the gay and lesbian community in North Carolina. Among the group's listed purposes are the promotion of professional expertise among its members, development of a directory of attorneys, and furthering legislative reforms to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

