

The FRONT PAGE

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Confederate Flag Protest Attracts Thousands

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This year, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday was celebrated a little differently in Columbia, South Carolina, with the largest mass demonstration to ever come to the capitol. Some 46,000 people, alternately singing the freedom songs of the Civil Rights movement and chanting, "Take it down," marched arm in arm to the Capitol steps carrying flags, banners and placards to protest the flying of the Confederate flag atop the Statehouse dome and the failure of the legislature to designate Dr. King's birthday a state holiday.

South Carolina's legislators have remained locked in a bitter controversy with each other and the NAACP and its supporters over the Confederate flag flying atop the Capitol building. South Carolina remains the only state in the country to fly the Confederate flag atop its Statehouse and to refuse to honor Dr. King's birthday at the state level.

The NAACP's response to the legislature's continued refusal to remove the flag was to call for a boycott of the state's tourism industry. The boycott, in effect even before the official January 1st date, has cost the state over 90 events and conferences resulting in the loss of millions of dollars to the industry.

As the protesters filled the steps and grounds of the statehouse, the sea of marchers stretched back to the march's point of origin more than a mile away at Zion Baptist church. People were urged to spread out around the capitol to let the rest come forward.

The state's Gov. Jim Hodges failed to appear, stating that he believed his role was that of a mediator and not to attend protest rallies. When Bishop Adams of the African Methodist Episcopal church pointed out Hodge's absence, the crowd booed loudly.

"I think the governor forgot who got him elected," Adam's said, setting off cheering and laughter from the crowd.

The march and the ensuing three-hour long rally filled with choirs and speakers from across the state came on the heels of the previous week's pro-flag rally that had some 6,000 people in attendance supporting the Confederate flag that has flown over the



In Columbia, protesters carry signs to protest the Confederate flag flying over the state capitol.

(Photo by Randi M. Bearden)

dome since 1962 when it was raised as a symbolic protest of the Civil Rights movement.

Keynote speaker NAACP President Kweisi Mfume declared that the boycott and marches would continue until the flag no longer flew. Mfume also noted in his speech that the oppression of minorities in any form was unacceptable including gay bashing.

People in all shapes, sizes and ages, the elderly and disabled with their wheelchairs, walkers and canes, men, women and children, reaching from one side of the street to the other for more than a mile marched to the steps of capitol building.

There were grandchildren marching with family members who had marched 40 years ago with Dr. King, parents marching so that their children would not have to continue to live under the flag and in many cases, children marching with their parents. The marchers were made up of activists and South Carolinians of every race and ethnicity from across the state and the nation forming a coalition the likes of which the state has very rarely seen.

In the midst of the sea of marchers, rainbow placards could be seen calling for

"Justice for all, not "Just Us" and "Do the right thing, take the flag down" as members of the gay/lesbian/bi/trans Greenville, SC based group Project FFREE marched in a show of solidarity.

When asked about his participation, a FFREE member responded, "We who comprise any group of oppressed people cannot afford to hide in the isolationist compartments of hierarchies of oppression. Any freedoms or gains made by any one group are tenuous at best as long as the constructs of other oppressions are left intact. It is an absolute imperative that we, and by we I mean all of us deal with race, class, gender and sexual orientation based oppressions in all of their forms."

Larry Candler of Greenville, SC's P-FLAG chapter stood in the intersection directly in front of the capitol, sign in hand that read, "Gay-Straight / Black-white / Same Struggle-Same Fight."

Another Greenville based GLBT group, AFFIRM Youth, was represented as well, carrying rainbow signs calling for the flag's removal.

Speakers and marchers were scathing in their criticisms of Sen. Arthur Ravenel, a

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NC ACLU Award to be given to Samantha Gellar

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina will honor Charlotte playwright Samantha Gellar with the 2000 ACLU-NC award at their annual Frank Porter Graham Dinner on Saturday, February 5. The dinner, held in honor of Frank Porter Graham whose life was dedicated to education, world peace and the protection of civil liberties, honors those who have demonstrated their faith in and perseverance for civil rights and liberties.

Gellar, 18, is being recognized for her efforts to combat the censorship of her one-act play, *Life Versus the Paperback Romance*, by the sponsors of the Charlotte Young Playwrights Festival in February, 1999. The play, a lesbian love story, won an award at the Festival, but Gellar was denied an opportunity to have her play produced.

The play is about two adult women, one visually impaired, who meet, talk and fall in love. There is no explicit sex or nudity. The two women do share a kiss near the end.

"In a way, the play is my artistic child, it says something about me," said Gellar, who is openly lesbian. "Once you've created something, you feel protective and proud of it."

Although the other four winning plays were performed publicly, the Children's Theater of Charlotte and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools said the play's discussion of sexual orientation was inappropriate for middle and high school students.

The director of Time Out Youth, a Charlotte support group for homosexual teen-agers, criticized the decision to withhold the play.

"There are a lot of well-meaning people who are looking the other way, allowing this kind of discrimination to take place," said Tonda Taylor.

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