

the rest of our world

No Freedom Ringing

Lilburn, Georgia – Berkmar High School students opened the school newspaper to a blank editorial page after the school's principal ordered the staff to pull two opinion pieces about a new club for straight and gay teens. Gwinnett County school officials said Principal Kendall Johnson told the staff of *Liberty* to remove the editorials because he felt it would disturb students during exam time, according to an Associated Press report last month.

"Mr. Johnson was not going to allow there to be distractions from what they are about teaching and learning," Gwinnett Schools spokeswoman Sloan Roach said.

The editorials debated whether a student club, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Society, should meet on school grounds. *Liberty* editor L'Anita Weiler, 18, said, "I had a feeling it was going to be censored." Weiler and student copy editor Kelly Shaul, 17, distributed copies of the editorials to Berkmar students after the paper was published.

"We wanted to run a censored stamp on the page. But Mr. Johnson censored our 'censored' stamp, which is pointless," Shaul said.

With One Voice

Washington, DC – Twenty-two gay and lesbian rights groups, smarting in the aftermath of the November election and bracing for President Bush's second term, issued a unity statement last month, insisting they are not backing off marriage equality but will simultaneously push for other "common priorities." The statement differentiated the organizations' approach from the bargaining stance reportedly taken by the Human Rights Campaign, which was among the signers.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that these priorities include hate crimes legislation, employment protection, immigration rights for gays and lesbian partners, overturning the ban on gays in the military, and the continuing battle against constitutional bans on same-sex marriage in states and Congress.

The statement, signed by Lambda Legal, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Log Cabin Republicans, Stonewall Democrats, the National Center for Lesbian Rights and others, maintains that American civil rights movements have historically proceeded through a "complex interweaving of legal victories, politi-

cal progress and advances in public opinion."

To Serve or Not To Serve

Washington, DC – The Human Rights Campaign renewed its call to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," in light of a Washington Post report that Army officials are considering changing Pentagon policy to allow for longer and more frequent call-ups of reservists to meet the demands of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Any policy that keeps patriotic Americans from serving during wartime is bad for the nation," said HRC Political Director Winnie Stachelberg. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is deeply hurtful to gay and lesbian service members and their families, and is costing the nation valuable service members."

According to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, more than 10,000 service members have been discharged since 1993 under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy at a cost of more than a quarter billion dollars to U.S. taxpayers.

And, by the way, a report last fall from the Urban Institute found that Vermont ranks second among the states in per capita rate of gay or lesbian military veterans (7.2 per thousand adults), after the District of Columbia ("just over 10 per thousand adults").

Montana Court Extends Equal Protection

Helena, Montana – The Montana Supreme Court declared late last year that the state constitution's guarantee of equal protection extends to gays, and ruled that the state university system must offer same-sex couples the same health benefits available to heterosexual couples. The *Seattle Times* reported that the high court determined, in a 4-3 decision, the policy violated the Montana Constitution's equal protection clause because unmarried heterosexual partners could receive the benefit by signing a common-law marriage affidavit, while unmarried gay partners could not.

"This is an incredible victory for the lesbian and gay employees of the University of Montana System who need to protect their families just like their straight colleagues do," said Scott Crichton, Executive Director of the ACLU of Montana. The ACLU brought the lawsuit in February 2002 on behalf of two lesbian couples and PRIDE, Inc., a Montana based lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advoca-

cy organization whose members include employees and domestic partners of employees of the University of Montana System.

Children of Evil

Costa Mesa, CA – Some parents and parishioners have accused the Roman Catholic diocese in Orange County of violating church doctrine by allowing a gay couple to enroll their children in a church-operated school. The parents' group demanded that St. John the Baptist School accept only children of families that pledge to abide by Catholic teachings, the *Los Angeles Times* reported last month. Church doctrine opposes gay relationships and adoption by same-sex couples.

School officials rejected the demand, and issued a new policy stating that a family's background "does not constitute an absolute obstacle to enrollment in the school." The Rev. Gerald M. Horan, superintendent of diocese schools, said, "It's a slippery slope to go down."

Some parents have promised to ask the Vatican to intervene and have threatened to pull their children from the school. Others are worried the boys' attendance will set a precedent, saying their presence is part of an effort by the gay community to change the church.

Mass. Marriage Ban Unlikely

Boston – As the Massachusetts legislature began a new session last month, there were growing indications that the proposed constitutional amendment banning gay unions will not survive the second vote required to put it on a general ballot. The legislation passed last March would allow civil unions, ban same-sex marriages, and convert marriages already performed to civil unions.

But Democrats increased their numbers at the State House last November. House Speaker Tom Finneran, who had proposed an all-out ban on both gay marriage and civil unions, is gone, replaced by liberal Democrat Salvatore DiMasi, who opposes any amendment.

Even one of the men who wrote the proposed amendment, Senate Minority Leader Brian Lees, is having second thoughts about it, according to 365Gay.com. Some state-house Democrats say Senate President Robert Travaglini is under pressure not to call a constitutional convention, allowing the amendment to die.

Last November, Travaglini gave the toast at the marriage of openly gay state Sen. Jarrett Barrios.

Pass the Remote

New York – Despite a national mood divided on issues such as same-sex marriage, gay TV is about to proliferate, according to *Newsday* early last month. On a cable TV channel called "here!", shows range from a gay parenting series and a drama about a teenager's two gay dads to a romantic comedy about lesbian monogamy, and a farce about gay mobster roommates.

On the Logo channel, a series produced by Cher and Chastity Bono will feature coming-out stories of celebrities and newsmakers, while reality fare will focus on gay cops in New York City, gay ocean-liner cruises, and dream weddings for gay couples.

Cablevision Systems Corp. announced that it is offering on-demand programming from here!. The service was launched in August 2003 and is now available in more than 30 million cable and satellite TV homes nationwide, giving it a head start over Logo, which MTV parent Viacom Inc. plans to launch this year as a digital channel with much wider distribution.

Wanted: Queer TX Sheriff

Dallas – She admits she is different from the other 253 county sheriffs in the state of Texas – now that Travis County's 8-year veteran (and openly lesbian) Sheriff Margo Frasier has left office. The difference? Sheriff Lupe Valdez doesn't wear a cowboy hat or have a mustache, she jokes to acknowledge the many ways that she stands out. When she was sworn in at midnight on New Year's Eve, according to the *Dallas Voice*, Valdez became Dallas County's first Democratic sheriff in more than 30 years, the first woman, the first Hispanic, and the first openly gay person ever elected to that county's top law enforcement office.

Jose Plata, the first openly gay person elected to the Dallas Public Schools Board of Trustees and a close friend of the new sheriff, said, "What she will do in that office is show the nasty, ugly right-wing group of people that someone with integrity and character, someone who is a Christian and a better person than they ever thought about being, is there serving them as the highest law enforcement official in Dallas County, and doing it very well," he said.

Valdez was endorsed by the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which endorses and donates only to openly gay or lesbian candidates, and she campaigned frequently at GLBT community events.

AZ Clergy March

Phoenix – Citing politicians who act like preachers and preachers who act like politicians, a small group calling itself "No Longer Silent: Clergy for Justice," staged a demonstration, as reported in the *Arizona Republic* last month.

"We want Arizonans to know that not everyone in the religious community agrees" with a proposed state constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriages and civil unions said the Rev. David Ragan of the Shadow Rock United Church of Christ. The clergy, opposing the ban represent Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Unitarian congregations. In downtown Phoenix, 120 ministers and priests walked to the state Capitol, where Gov. Janet Napolitano was preparing to deliver her State of the State speech.

A poll published in the *Republic* indicated that a majority of Arizona residents are against a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Trans Celebrate Anti-Discrimination Guidelines

New York – Transgender advocates and activists are celebrating the release of Guidelines Regarding Gender Identity Discrimination from the New York City Commission on Human Rights late last year. The guidelines interpret the Human Rights Law and are designed to educate the public about the prohibition on discrimination based on gender identity and expression that became part of New York City human rights law with the passage of Int. No. 24, the transgender rights bill signed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"The transgender community still faces persistent and severe discrimination, being turned away from housing, health care, and employment on the basis of gender identity and gender expression," says Carrie Davis, a working group member and coordinator of the Gender Identity Project (GIP) at New York's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center. "These guidelines will help our community know its rights and make this law more effective at preventing a systemic discrimination, one that frequently affects our most needy and least powerful members." ▼

Compiled by Susan McMillan.