

# Maine Defeats Anti-Gay Referendum

AUGUSTA, ME – In a rare bright spot in gay and lesbian ballot issues, Maine voters turned down a referendum backed by conservative Christian groups that would have repealed an anti-discrimination measure that had already passed the legislature and been signed into law.

The November vote was the fourth LGBT equality-related referendum in the past 8 years. The margin was reported in the *Gay City News* as 45 percent for the referendum, leaving 55 percent as voting against.

"Today's win proves that dogged, grassroots organizing can overcome the lies and smears of anti-gay zealots and the profound unfairness of having minority rights put up for a popular vote," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "After the marriage amendment losses we've experienced over the last 12 months, this is a much-needed victory for our national movement — it proves we can win statewide contests. Every lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

American is deeply indebted to the staff and volunteers of Maine Won't Discriminate, and to the people of Maine for embracing fairness and rejecting bigotry."

Cited by other sources as also having worked for the victory was Equality Maine.

GLAD, NGLTF, and HRC all issued press releases touting their contributions to the win. Each group invested funds and expertise in grassroots organizing against the measure.

MassEquality, the pro-marriage equality organizing group in the Bay State, organized phone banks among its supporters to call Maine residents to remind them to vote.

Because the last two contests in Maine were so close (the measure in 2000 lost by less than 5,000 votes), voter identification and get-out-the-vote work was considered crucial. Starting in 2003, Equality Maine began an ambitious program to identify pro-LGBT voters through door-to-door canvassing in Portland, according to a press release from NGLTF.

Supporters of the repeal

measure focused their campaign on gay marriage, even though the law to be repealed does not mention marriage. Other tactics linked the anti-discrimination law to "pedophiles" teaching in schools.

Ron Bilancia, a member of Maine Won't Discriminate (see "The Way Life Should Be ... Almost," *OITM* October, 2005), sent a victory message to the Christian Civic League's Michael Heath, who led the support for the defeated repeal referendum: "[A]dmit that your resounding 10-point defeat in Tuesday's Maine vote on Question #1 could have been nothing other than God's will," he urged. "[T]he people of Maine will not stand for intolerance cloaked in religion nor the systematic discrimination of ANY of their children. ... Now ALL Mainers will have the very protection from discrimination that you as church members have enjoyed while at the same time working to deny it to others. I can only hope you have now seen God and Jesus' will for what it really is." ▼

# Cyber Center Deletes Porn

BURLINGTON – It wasn't a positive working atmosphere for R.U.1.2? Americorps Vista staff member Peggy Luhrs. Her primary responsibility is staffing the David Bohnett Cyber Center. "We started to get lots of 19-year-old straight guys," Luhrs said, whose primary online activity was searching out cyber porn images of women.

Luhrs was not the only person concerned. "One woman complained about 'why are they doing this here,'" she said, also noting a recent influx of middle-school-age girls at the center, who, she said, "shouldn't have to be exposed" to the explicit and sometimes violent content on neighboring computers.

The computer stations at the center are not isolated within carrels or booths, but sit side-by-side on two long counters.

In response to these complaints, the center has instituted

a new policy that reads, "In order to help maintain safe space in R.U.1.2?'s David Bohnett Cyber Center, we must ask that patrons refrain from visiting pornographic websites while using the computers in the Cyber Center. Repeated violations of this rule may result in the patron being asked to leave the center. Questions about this policy should be directed to the staff."

The struggle is between preserving the center's mission to be a safe place for all users to access explicit "information about sex, sexuality and sexual orientation," and the realization that some pornography harms women. Requiring a staff member to involuntarily be exposed to such images could be construed as allowing a "hostile workplace" atmosphere/

Luhrs identified the Center's philosophy as "sex-positive" but suggested that the phrase

has become a shield for violent pornography. "I'm a sex-positive person. But it seems that people who get it about what safe space is about, when it comes to pornography, suddenly sex-positive is a priority.

"We are not anti-sex. Christopher [Kaufman, executive director] had us all come up with our favorite informational sex sites," she explained. The list will be made available to any patron who asks for it.

"My objection is that porn is harmful to women," Luhrs continued. "People are not thinking about how this stuff is made. The feminist analysis has been obliterated by the so-called sex radicals. They're not very radical. It's Marcuse's theory of 'repressive tolerance': the culture will allow whatever supports its values. It's all these big corporations pushing commodified body types. That's not sex liberation." ▼

# Vt Leg, CU & Fed Rights

MONTPELIER – In a then-little-noticed move at the end of the last legislative session, Senator Rep. Alison Clarkson (D-Woodstock) began circulating, with Matt Dunne (D-Hartland), a letter to Congressional leaders. At the behest of constituent Steve Swayne and his partner Mike Backman of Woodstock, the letter urged House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to extend federal marriage benefits to civil union partners.

A copy of the letter was also presented to Rep. Barney Frank on his fundraising visit to the Green Mountain State in late October. The funds Frank was raising were for Democratic candidates for the Vermont House.

The letter began as a request for a resolution, Swayne said. "My representative, Alison Clarkson, worked the system as much as she could, and the leadership determined that a letter would be the best way to go." He said Clarkson was a personal friend who attended the couple's civil union. Swayne, an associate professor in the music department of Dartmouth College, drafted much of the content of the letter by way of information provided to the Legislative Counsel while its staff was working on the originally proposed resolution.

"We are trying to shore up a right we already have here" in Vermont, said Rep. Clarkson. "We wanted to hold President Bush accountable for the states' rights statements he had made. And we wanted to add to the foundation of rights that the state can extend." Clarkson urged members of the community and allies to follow up on the letter with Rep. Barney Frank and with Rep. Bernie Sanders.

"This letter was not meant to undermine any movement toward marriage equality," Clarkson explained.

"I support any step in moving us toward equality," said Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force Chairwoman Beth Robinson. She said Rep. Jason Lorber (D-Burlington) kept the Task Force in the loop while the letter was being circulated.

Rep. Lorber maintained that the letter was a positive step successfully publicizing the fact that civil union partners do not currently receive any federal rights or benefits. "Hundreds of thousands of people learned that what

we have now is not adequate. We should not rest until we have equal rights."

Senator Matt Dunne said he had already been "challenged with the conflict between state and federal laws with respect to Medicaid rules and having to use state funds to make up the difference.

"It is clear just how often federal laws don't allow states to convey benefits as we see fit," Dunne continued. "Civil Union and marriage are not mutually exclusive. People in relationships need to be recognized at the federal level on an equitable basis."

Asked whether Governor Jim Douglas had been invited to sign the letter, Dunne said a decision was made "to keep the letter a House and Senate activity, although we would have been delighted to have his support."

Rep. Robert Dostis (D-Waterbury) admitted that, "given the current climate in Washington, the chances that the letter will have much impact are small." Asked about how it might affect efforts toward marriage equality, Dostis said, "If we could get all the same rights, it's a matter of semantics."

The letter was signed by 97 out of 160 legislators.

Some of the signers are not usually counted among LGBT allies, including Sens. Vincent Illuzzi (R-Newport), Hull Maynard (R-Shrewsbury), and Kevin Mullin (R-Rutland). Senator Diane Snelling (R-Shelburne), usually counted among equality allies, was also among the Republicans who signed the letter.

The letter quoted statements current President George W. Bush had made during the 2004 campaign, such as "I don't think we should deny people rights to a civil union, a legal arrangement if that's [what] a state chooses to do." Bush made that statement in an interview with Charles Gibson of ABC News on October 26, 2004, according to the legislative letter.

Also in the letter was a brief listing of significant federal rights and benefits currently denied to same-sex couples, including federal inheritance rights, social security survivor benefits, veteran's benefits for partners and dependents, spousal immunity from compelled testimony in federal courts, and immigration and naturalization standing. ▼