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## Another Year, Another Hearing

by Dot

By 7pm on Tuesday April 11, over 600 people had arrived at the State House in Montpelier. They came from all over Vermont to attend the 3rd annual public hearing on the possible inclusion of "sexual orientation" in existing civil rights legislation.

Some had come to testify. Some had come to watch. Nine of the Judiciary Committee's eleven members attended: Amy Davenport, Chair (D-Montpelier), Robert Paolini, Vice Chair (D-Waterbury), Pamela Crispe (R-Brattleboro), George Dunsmore (R-Georgia), Sally Fox (D-Essex Junction), Mique Glitman (D-Burlington), Ruth Stokes (R-Williston), Elmer Faris (R-Barnet), Richard Westman (R-Cambridge).

The well of the House was jammed with people. Extra chairs were brought in and scores of people sat on the floor, squeezing in behind the circular rows of seats. The crowd far exceeded the room capacity of 350 people. Dozens of people flowed into the hallway where they could not see but they listened through a speaker system.

The crowd was tense. Supporters of H211 wore pins with pink triangles stating, "Support the Rights of All Vermonters." The oponents had made 3" round stickers, proclaiming simply, "PRO FAMILY." Supporters of the bill were able to get some of the stickers. Many Gays then wore the stickers next to their pins throughout the evening.

Why all the fuss? Davenport said, "It is not a very complicated bill." She described the two sides of the argument as either believing that gays represent a minority group, needing the special protection of civil rights legislation, or not.

This fundamental issue attracted a fundamentalist crowd to wage a holy war against homosexuals. By 7:15 the gavel struck and the 5-1/2 hour march of alternating pro-con 2-minute testimony, began.

The room was oppressively hot for the first few hours. By 8:30, Davenport called a break, informing the crowd that we had a long evening ahead of us since we were only 3/4 of the way down the 1st of 5 pages.

Several times eruptions of applause or laughter from the crowd interrupted the hearing. Each time, Davenport rapped her gavel and reminded the crowd that the hearing would be called if it was not allowed to proceed in an orderly fashion.

As time passed the room emptied out

a bit more until by midnight only 100 or so remained.

At 1:45, the last testimony had been delivered, the gavel fell one last time, and the handful exhausted people left could go home. The remaining Gays left knowing that the last three people testified for the bill.

Davenport believes the hearings are important. When asked to comment on the size of the hearing, she said, "I think the size ... reflects the importance of this bill. I think it's an issue that the legislature has to deal with."

She acknowledged that the hearings are a painful process, saying, "It can't be easy to be a homosexual and hear the kinds of things that people say. "But she insisted that the hearings are an important public education process and they are an essential exercise of First Amendment rights. She said, "a bill that people feel this strongly about cannot be dealt with without giving people a chance to say what their feelings are." She acknowledged that "some testimony ends up not addressing the bill and this is not productive, but the first amendment right to free speech is what a public hearing is all about."

When asked to comment on Ronnie Bancroft, who has been followed, threatened and her house has been burglarized since the hearing, she said simply that the committee is aware of it and will be following the investigation.

Davenport a veteran of all three hearings was on the Judiciary Committee in 1987, the 1st year the bill was introduced. She feels the bill has made progress, that house members feel it is important to get it to the floor, and that it will get more votes this year than it would have in the previous two years. She ended though, by acknowledging, "It's a long, slow process."

The committee held a closed hearing with testimony from representatives of the business community that might be effected by this bill on Wednesday, April 19. Soon after, they could be voting on whether or not to send the bill to the house floor for a vote.

Many of the testimonies against the bill were the same scriptural readings and misinterpretations of the story of Sodom. Homosexual behavior was called "sterile activity in terms of positive biology." Gays were called immoral, decadent, perverse. One fervent historian reminded us that we are "One Nation Under God" obviously-unaware that this phrase was added to the

pledge during the red scare of the 50's.

One person angrily stated that his "taxdollars were being wasted on such foolishness, you people (the legislators) should get back to the business of running this State." Several people told impassioned stories about nieces who were molested by homosexuals. Still other called Gay lifestyle one that is "centered around unrestrained lust," or cited statistics stating that Gay men have up to 20 sexual partners per night and up to 200 in their life time.

The two most remarkable testimonies against the bill were from a Professor of Anatomy from Norwich University and an owner of a bed and breakfast. The professor coughed and sputtered over the precise terms for the tissues present in the vagina, stratified squamous epithelium, vs simple columnar epithelium and how the rectum unlike the vagina is easily abraded, exposing to infection. After totally embarrassing himself, he exploded, "A God who is indifferent would not have made us that way." Lauri Larsen, who followed him was inspired to say, "I'm worried too about the people who are teaching in our schools. The bed and breakfast owner was terribly afraid that his wife and daughter changing the sheets would catch some deadly disease if he was not permitted to discriminate against Gay men as guests in his business.

Some especially telling one-liners follow:

"I do not support irrational bigotry."

"Nazis and fascists, indeed many of Hitler's top officers were homosexuals, not Christians."

"If I am wrong, I go in the ground. If you're wrong, you go to Hell."

After Laurie Larsen ended her testimony with "Heterosexuality is a learned behavior and can be helped," applause and laughter erupted. Davenport rapped her gavel and reminded the crowd of her previous warning.

As in past years the Gay community, their parents and friends produced a wide variety of testimony that they could all be proud of.

Gerry Martinez explained that Gays are one of three groups currently not protected by the law from cases of domestic abuse.

Keith Goslant spoke of the verbal harassment and physical abuse he has been subjected to and the personal strength he feels from being silent no longer. He said "If need be I'll come back and say it again

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