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Hate Crimes Bill Wins in the House

After a stirring speech by Rep. Francis Brooks (D-Montpelier) and a surprising change of heart by Rep. John Murphy (D-Ludlow), Hate-Crimes bill H. 504 passed the Vermont House of Representatives on March 23. This decision came just weeks after the U.S. Senate passed the Hate Crimes Statistic Act and issued defeat to notorious gay-rights opponent Jesse Helms.

H. 504 states that "it is the right of every person regardless of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, ancestry, age, handicap, or sexual orientation to be secure and protected from intimidation and physical harm caused by the wrongful activities of individuals and groups." The bill passed by a wide margin of 80-51.

Some members of the House, including Rep. Murphy, had initially misperceived the H. 504 to be something of a Gay Rights bill in disguise. Only a few days separated his remarks of "You're doing all this for the lizzies and the queers" and "I have searched my soul and said I guess I've been wrong." Though theories abound, there is yet no firm explanation for Murphy's change of heart. In the past,

Murphy has been the most vocal opponent of any legislation seeking to protect or enhance the rights of gays and lesbians.

In a moving testimony, Rep. Brooks described to the house what it was like to be black in Vermont, which has one of the lowest percentages of blacks in the nation. "I'm reminded of a spiritual that I learned as a little child," Brooks recalled, "with these simple words: 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long ways from home.' I have called Vermont my home and never want to feel as though I am a long ways from home."

Brooks also recounted the time he sent a photograph of the House members home to his family: "As a joke I wrote in the letter to them, 'See if you can pick me out.' Even though I said it as a joke, there no doubt was some truth to the feeling that I conveyed."

Lobbying efforts from the Attorney General's office and the Human Rights Commission contributed to the bill's finally being approved. Keith Goslant of the Statewide Coalition for Lesbians and Gay Men maintained contact with the Human Rights Commission to insure that Vermont's gay and lesbian community was

being fairly represented by the bill.

Opponents to the bill claimed that it granted special privileges to groups such as lesbians and gay men. In their battle against the bill, the group also protested that H. 504 had been hidden away without allowing those opposed a chance to testify. In fact, committee hearings had been reopened so that the bill's opponents could register their complaints. The Ad Hoc Committee against H. 504 never appeared to take the stand, though their allegations continued.

One specific opponent of the bill, Rep. Mangan of Woodstock, followed his negative vote by saying "It was not my intent to vote against the bill in its entirety, but at the request of many of my constituents, I could not vote in favor of the sexual orientation portion contained in the bill." Such remarks ironically serve to emphasize the need for legislation such as H. 504 to protect the rights of all citizens under the law.

Readers can write to OITM to request copies of the official roll call vote for H. 504. Having passed the House, the Hate-Crimes bill is currently under discussion in the Senate.

After Acacia: An Interview with Winston Brathwaite

Perhaps by now, for many of us, the name Winston Brathwaite is very familiar, given the wide media coverage his story of discrimination has prompted, from the front page headline in the *Burlington Free Press* to a WRUV News Forum devoted to the issue of homophobia and even to the *Boston Globe*. Certainly, coming out as a first-year student at the University of Vermont is difficult enough without the publicity Winston has endured, but it has become part of his determination to see that justice is done.

It all started in the fall semester when Winston came to campus. "Being new, I decided to try to socialize by going to frat parties and meeting people," Winston recalled. "In this process, I got a bid to pledge

to Acacia. This was something I could get a shot at for the hell of it." Winston was attracted by what Acacia stood for: independence, God, and individualism. Throughout the six week pledge process, he was told that he was their number one pledge and that he could be an officer right away. The only problem the Acacia brothers perceived was that Winston was not close enough to the other brothers.

"I did that purposefully," Winston said, "because with my being gay, they might have felt I was trying to seduce them, so I held back." During Hell Week, he was told to meet with each brother for a half hour. It was at this time that he came out. "If I was going to live with them, I wanted them to know it about me," he said.

The Acacia brothers' attitude toward him changed drastically. They held several meetings on the issue which Winston was not allowed to attend. In effect, they gave him no choice on the matter. He was out.

"Since I wasn't allowed to say anything, I wasn't going to take (their decision) lying down," said Winston. He wrote a letter to Acacia that expressed his feelings about their decision: that they were too ignorant to understand him and that he was upset and angry over their hypocrisy about his status as a pledge - from being number one to outcast.

The brothers read the letter at a meeting and subsequently took it to the office of Greek Affairs as damage control (or, as *(continued on page 10)*)