

## Mississippi Women Resisting Hate Crimes, Homophobia

Expressions of solidarity are urgently sought for a group of Mississippi women who have become the target of hate crimes.

Lesbians and activist women opened a bookstore about four years ago in Gulfport, MS. Sister Spirit evolved into a rape crisis center, with a food bank and related services; the group purchased 120 acres of land near Ovett, MS, to create a safe space/retreat center. Recently, "highly selective excerpts from Sister Spirit's newsletter" appeared in the local press and in church bulletins, along with calls to buy back the land. The Christian Ministers Association has held one large "community meeting," fueling homophobia. According to Maria Pappalardo of the American Friends Service Committee's Nationwide Women's Program "Pets of Sister Spirit organizers have been killed and left draped on their bullet-riddled mail box. Local police have shown support" for the hate campaign.

The women contacted the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), which has been in touch with the Community Relations Service of the US Department of Justice. The CRS has notified local Mississippi law enforcement officials that they are monitoring the situation.

Sister Spirit seeks donations for fencing for their property and to purchase CB radios; checks may be sent to Camp Sister Spirit, PO Box 12, Ovett, MS 39464; they are a 501(c)3 organization. Supporters are needed to help occupy the land and to erect fencing; others are asked to help publicize the situation. Religious leaders are asked to be in touch with the Christian Ministers Association and to "labor with them to stop acting on their biases". The leader appears to be Rev. Ray Thornton, Good Hope Baptist Church, Stringer, MS. The women of Sister Spirit prefer that people not call them directly for updates; Robin Kane at the NGLTF (202/332-6483, ext. 3311) is serving as information liaison. (NGLTF, American Friends Service Committee) ▼

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## FBI Launches Investigation in Mississippi

The FBI launched an investigation in late January in the volatile situation in Ovett, Mississippi. Two lesbians in Ovett have been harassed and threatened, and opponents have organized town meetings to condemn the women and their feminist retreat and plot ways to force them from town. The FBI initiated the investigation after Brenda and Wanda Henson of Camp Sister Spirit received a threat through the U.S. mail, which is a federal offense.

On Jan. 11, the Hensons received through the mail a defaced news article about themselves and Camp Sister Spirit with a threatening message hand-written beneath the original headline. The letter was handed over to the FBI last week.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) forwarded a copy of the letter to the U.S. Department of Justice Jan. 12, following a meeting NGLTF attended that same day with the Justice Department to discuss federal involvement in the situation. Justice officials said at the meeting that because sexual orientation is not included in federal civil rights laws, the agency could only launch an investigation if there are violations of other generally applicable federal statutes, such as mail or phone threats. NGLTF agreed to forward to the Justice Department details of violent and threatening incidents aimed at the Hensons so that the agency could determine whether any of the incidents violate federal criminal code and could be cause for an investigation. Fol-

lowing the meeting, NGLTF contacted the Hensons and received a chronological list of incidents targeting them and Camp Sister Spirit, as well as a copy of the mail threat. NGLTF forwarded the information immediately to the Justice Department. The Hensons also directly contacted the FBI in Mississippi.

NGLTF has called on the Department of Justice to intervene by monitoring and mediating the situation. In a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno last month, NGLTF Executive Director Peri Jude Radevic requested that the Department of Justice intervene in the following ways: the Community Relations Service perform mediation in the community to alleviate the potential for violence; the FBI monitor the situation for any possible hate crimes; and the Civil Rights Division investigate any attempts to violate the Hensons' civil rights.

"The FBI investigation is an important step towards insuring the safety and rights of the Hensons," said Robin Kane, NGLTF Public Information Manager. "NGLTF continues to stress the need for the Attorney General to direct the Community Relations Service to mediate. This situation highlights how the absence of federal civil rights laws that include sexual orientation prevent federal agencies from protecting the rights of gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens." (NGLTF) ▼

## VT Department of Health Awards

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In addition to these grants, two awards for prevention efforts focused on people with HIV and their sexual partners were awarded to the Comprehensive Care Clinic at the University Health Center in Burlington (\$20,000) and the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project (\$1,500). A \$2,500 grant was given to the People With AIDS Coalition to Support their speakers bureau and newsletter.

Other grants awarded focused on injection drug users (\$24,500), high risk

youth (\$39,500 not including Outright), and women at increased risk (\$6,000).

This year's awards represent a \$60,000 increase in funding over the \$100,000 that was given out in 1993. This increase comes from a small increase in Vermont's federal prevention grant and a one-time \$40,000 contribution from the Department of Education for prevention programs for high risk youth. Grant applications were reviewed by an eight-member external review panel, and 19 of 21 applications received at least partial funding. ▼