

Camp Sister Spirit Update

The following is the text of the letter sent by Attorney General Janet Reno in response to the harassment of lesbians in Overt Mississippi, reported in last month's OITM. This is the first time the Justice Department has mediated in a gay-related dispute.

February 17, 1994

Peri Jude Radecic
Executive Director
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
1734 14th St. NW
Washington DC 20009

Dear Ms. Radecic.

Thank you for your December 7, 1993 letter concerning the situation in Overt, Mississippi. As are you, I am deeply troubled by the harassment and in-

timidation of Brenda and Wanda Henson, the lesbian owners of Camp Sister Spirit. The intolerance and bigotry demonstrated by some of the people of Overt has no place in this country.

I have carefully considered your requests on behalf of the Hensons for assistance from the Department of Justice. As you are aware, Department officials met with representatives of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) on January 12 to talk about the Department's ability to respond to the situation in Overt.

As was discussed at the January 12 meeting, federal jurisdiction is currently restricted by statute. At this time, sexual orientation is not a protected status under the federal civil rights law. Accordingly, we are unable to assist the Hensons through the enforcement of existing federal criminal civil rights laws concerning housing or federally-protected activities.

However, we recently learned from an NGLTF staff member that some federal criminal laws may have been violated through use of the federal postal system. The NGLTF staff member reported that an envelope addressed to the Hensons containing a threatening letter was post-marked January 9, 1994 and mailed from Gulfport, Mississippi. Based on this development, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been asked to conduct an investigation into this matter. If the evidence shows that there was a violation of federal criminal statutes, appropriate action will be taken.

In addition to initiating the FBI investigation, I have signed a tasking order pursuant to my authority under 28 U.S.C. §§509-510 asking the Community Relations Service (CRS) to intervene in the

matter and to help mediate the dispute. While CRS is statutorily limited to assist only in conflicts arising from race, color and national origin issues, I consider the threat of violence in Overt to be real and believe CRS's involvement is both appropriate and necessary to restore calm to the community.

Finally, I have asked my staff to schedule your requested meeting. Since the Overt case is a pending criminal investigation, it would be inappropriate for me to discuss the specifics of the case at this time. However, I look forward to the opportunity to talk with you about the general issues that the situation highlights.

I intend to keep fully apprised of the situation and ask that you continue to provide information to the Department. Thank you again for sharing your concerns with me. Together we can and will fight the discrimination faced by the Hensons and others like them.

Sincerely,


Janet Reno

DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY TO THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS SERVICE

ORDER NO. 1850-94

By virtue of the authority vested in me as Attorney General of the United States, including 28 U.S.C. §§ 509 and 510, I hereby authorize the Community Relations Service to intervene in the matter arising from the establishment of Camp Sister Spirit in Overt, Mississippi. The Community Relations Service shall provide conciliation and technical assistance to the community and the persons therein. ▼

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