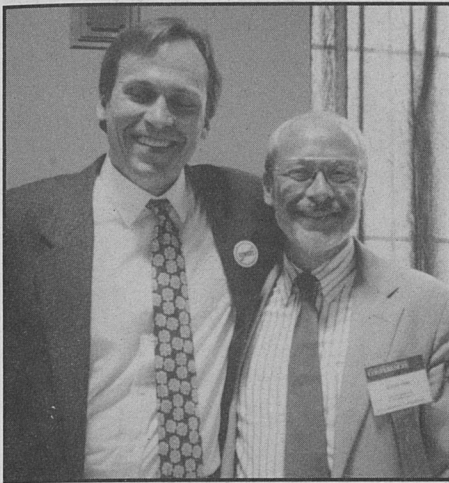


# ACLU Conference Highlights Lesbian and Gay Rights



by Deborah Lashman

A luncheon speech by Tom Stoddard, President of Lambda Legal Defense Fund, was one of several sessions devoted to the rights of lesbians and gays at the ACLU's National Biennial Conference held in Burlington June 26-30.

Stoddard's speech, "Five Years After Bowers and Hardwick," walked a fine line between optimism and reality, as he described for delegates the enormous advances in the world of lesbian and gay civil rights in the past twenty-five years. In 1966 when Stoddard graduated from high school, *Time* magazine described "homosexuality" as a "pernicious sickness." In the 1960's no jurisdiction in the U.S. had a civil rights law protecting lesbians and gays. In 1970 a mainstream publisher, Bantam, published *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, but Were Afraid to Ask* by David Ruben, which described "homosexuals" as, "trying the impossible, solving the problem with only half the pieces...eliminating from the start the most obvious source of love, woman," and discussed lesbians in the chapter on prostitutes.

Today four states (Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Connecticut) as well as 75 localities, including most of the large cities of the U.S. have some form of civil rights protection for lesbians and gays. Approximately one fifth of the American population is protected. This past month *Time* magazine supported the ACLU's lawsuit against the Boy Scouts' attempt to prohibit a gay man from becoming a scoutmaster, and last year *Time* virtually endorsed marriage for gays and lesbians. Last year Orrin Hatch, who six

years ago described the Democrats as the "party of homosexuals," publicly apologized and said he made a mistake.

Stoddard acknowledged that we still have a long way to go. "I don't mean to minimize the difficulties that we all face. Two men were arrested six months ago in Cincinnati for holding hands in a public park under an indecency statute. Particularly for lesbians and gay men the world is still full of peril. With increased visibility comes increased physical violence." However, "The world of isolation and invisibility of twenty-five years ago is gone for good."

The ACLU played a large role in helping to change that world and Stoddard called on delegates to continue that fight. "We need as a civil rights community to embrace gay rights...it is the cutting edge," "Think what you can do to embrace these issues on a local level. Make yourselves visible, march in our parades, include us in your mailings." He concluded his speech with a plea to delegates to, "Use the words we have chosen to describe ourselves...don't use the word 'homosexual', it makes us seem like things", and to "help the ACLU be as inclusive as it can". "This is ultimately a fight for diversity and the celebration of diversity everywhere".

A very receptive and responsive audience gave Stoddard a standing ovation at the conclusion of his speech. On a more somber note, it was announced immediately after the speech that Thurgood Marshall had just resigned from the Supreme Court, giving rise to a spontaneous groan of dismay from the crowd.

In addition to Stoddard's speech, Lesbian and Gay Rights Issues for the 1990's, HIV in the Health Care Setting, and AIDS 1991 were among the workshop topics at the conference. ▼

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In 1986 the ACLU created the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project to focus on issues of concern to lesbians and gays and on issues of AIDS. The Project, with a staff of five, is located in the New York headquarters of the ACLU at 132 West 43rd St., New York, NY 10036. (212) 944-9800 ext. 545. The Vermont ACLU is currently working on the civil rights issue in Vermont-see Ben Truman's article in this issue for an update and how you can help. Contact the Vermont ACLU at PO Box 810, 100 State St., Montpelier, VT 05602 (802) 223-6304.

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