

Confessions of a Statehouse Testifier

Peter Cooper

My ancient American Heritage Dictionary defines the word testify as "to bear witness" and "to make a statement of truth" which are pretty solemn instructions when you appear at a gay rights hearing under the Golden Dome in Montpelier.

I had my first opportunity "to make a statement of truth" on a chilly March evening close to five years ago.

I was terrified.

You see, as a supporter of gay rights, my fear did not stem from "coming out" in a public hearing, but from something I had found on my car windshield the Sunday before. It was a tract, a real Bible tract and, among other dire warnings, it said that friends of homosexuals would burn in the pit of Hell. That, in itself, was not the threat. It was the attitude underneath it. My over-active imagination went to work as I stood around the Statehouse waiting for the hearing to begin. I imagined truckloads of mean fundamentalists following me home, running me off the road, and... Mentally, I squelched that scenario real fast.

The hearing was to take place in the infamous Room 11, but it proved too small for the burgeoning crowd. We were moved to the well of the House, the Grand Hall of Vermont legislation.

As the crowd grew, I found myself eying each new arrival, wondering if they were a "friendly" or a "fundy." All our leaders were there greeting us and having us find seats together as a show of unity. The House Committee looked completely aghast at this crowd. I don't think they figured it would stir up so much interest. I noticed a difference in the two sides. The opponents looked, for the most part, very sour. The men would fold their arms around their chests and glower. Our side

laughed and hugged and talked together and generally seemed more lively. In subsequent years, the busloads of folks they brought in began imitating us. One or two even smiled. They also plastered themselves with badges extolling the virtues of family. Of course, we immediately put these on too, because we are, after all, family.

When they called my name (you had to sign up first), I felt like I was going into one of Jackie Gleason's "Humma, Humma, Humma" routines. But I managed to lurch to the chair in front of the still goggle-eyed legislators. My, but you are on center stage in that position! Every light, every eye is focussed on you. Even the TV camera stares glassily at you. I think my testimony went by sounding something like HAAAAHHHHAAAAHHH! Luckily, I had made copies to give to the committee.

But something wonderful happened when I finished. I felt great. I guess that's what they mean by being empowered.

Now I had the bug. Other issues came up which demanded testimony: abortion rights, ERA, parental notification, so I became a regular testifier. I wondered if I was getting hooked on the little chair with the TV camera trained on it. But it didn't matter for it was all for the good. Over the past few years, certain scenes stand out for me as we gathered in support of gay rights.

- The courage of gays and lesbians who came out, some for the first time, as they testified in the full glare of the TV and politicians.
- The gay man who stood up while testifying. Everybody else always sat down. He made the evening that night.
- A gay man and his mother embracing

under the frowns of the so-called family loving fundamentalists.

- Large male fundies with chin beards, leaning over the balcony, glaring and taking pictures with their camcorders.
- A lesbian quietly recounting her experience of walking hand in hand with her lover and a man in a car trying to run them down.
- A gay man testifying with a bag on his head to signify the tremendous risk gays and lesbians take when they come out to fight for their rights.

During the 1992 legislative session our gay rights bill will be coming up again. It's been introduced in both Houses, which means at least one committee will be calling for an open hearing. Although many will testify, the most important thing is to show up. A demonstration of strength, of our willingness to fight for our rights is critical to passage of the Bill.

The greatest feeling is to witness the solidarity of lesbians and gays with each other, and with non-gays. The sense of unity and friendship and witnessing is the strongest atmosphere this veteran testifier has ever experienced. So, when the call goes out and it's hearing time at the Vermont Legislature, I'll be heading to Montpelier.

How about you? ▼



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