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VERMONT'S FORUM FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES

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Gay Burlington Teen Triggers Controversies

Cross-Dressing Incident Resulted in Harassment

by Hugh Coyle

BURLINGTON -- Burlington High School sophomore Matthew Stickney, 15, was found on Thursday, September 19, after having been listed as a runaway. Stickney had been suspended from school the previous week after school officials demanded that he cease wearing a dress to classes.

A rally at Burlington High School following Stickney's suspension turned violent on Friday, September 13, when Stickney was struck in the face by another teen, Shawn Stevens of South Burlington. Stickney had been joined by about one hundred supporters outside of school.

On Tuesday morning, September 17, Stickney failed to appear for a follow-up meeting with a police mediator. After some investigation into his absence, Stickney was declared a runaway later that afternoon.

Stickney reportedly spoke via telephone to the local media, claiming "they won't find me, I am deep underground and they will never find me." The following day, Stickney was discovered in Burlington and taken back into state custody. He had previously been living in a foster home supervised by the Baird Center.

Lt. Bill LaWare, a member of the Burlington Police department's special Community Based Office, reported that "Matt has been found; he is safe and that was our real focus during this time frame... He is where he needs to be and hopefully things will work out for Matthew."

Stickney, who openly refers to himself as a drag queen, withstood repeated warnings from BHS Principal Ridgely Schott to stop wearing a wig and dress to school during the opening weeks of the school year. When Stickney persisted, Schott suspended him, also claiming that the teen had used abusive language in discussions with the School's administration.

"I thought I would do it because it is who I am as a person," said Stickney in defense of his actions. "I thought of the reaction I would get — people making fun of me — but I just winged it and thought I'd deal with it if it came along."

Donna Jemilo, Superintendent of Schools, called the initial series of events a "complex situation," citing the challenge to "balance the need to maintain an environment that facilitates learning for all students and the rights of one individual." She referred to Stickney's cross-dressing as a "distraction" in the classroom setting.

Despite Jemilo's statement, many of Stickney's peers considered the school's treatment of him to be unfair. Amy Lawson, also a sophomore at BHS, commented during the protest, "Everybody here just dresses the way they want to be. They wear spikes, purple, green colored hair. He wants to wear a dress and a wig and that is no different than the way other kids are dressing."

Stickney approached the Vermont American Civil Liberties Union on the day of the protest, and the organization immediately provided him with legal counsel in the person of Board member and cooperating attorney Lisa Shelkrot. Openly gay state Senatorial candidate David Curtis, former Defender General and an ACLU board member, also offered to be of assistance if needed.

Leslie Williams, Executive Director of ACLU/VT, said, "The ACLU thinks any disruption to the educational

process at Burlington High School that has occurred is the direct result of the actions of the school principal in refusing to allow a student to attend school wearing a dress. Matt has as much right to wear a dress to school as a Scotsman has to wear a kilt or a girl has to wear blue jeans. It seems to us that school officials should keep their prejudices at home and conduct school business in a fair and impartial way."

Shelkrot had previously voiced her support for Stickney in a television interview, saying, "He has the right to self expression. He also has the right to be treated without gender discrimination... a dress code that treats boys and girls differently — a policy that prohibits men from wearing dresses and allows women to — would probably be in violation of the equal protection clause."

Local parent Tracy Buttles of Westford also expressed dismay at the School's position. "As a parent, I want my kids to go a school that does not tolerate discrimination of any kind," she said, "and is accepting and supportive of differences in individuals."

On Friday, Stickney's supporters skipped classes to join him outside the School building in a protest rally. Some had cross-dressed themselves to further demonstrate their support.

During the protest, a false fire alarm led to the evacuation of the School. The group of protesters was subsequently asked to leave School property, and the students moved on to North Street, eventually ending up near the bus stop on North and Institute. Meanwhile, Stickney and two of his classmates attended a meeting with school officials, police officers, and a mediator.

Shortly after returning from the meeting, Stickney was assaulted by Stevens. Burlington police have already classified the incident as a hate crime. A second assault complaint involving another juvenile is currently under investigation by the Burlington police department. If convicted on the assault charge, Stevens may face stiffer sentencing due to Vermont's Hate Crimes law.

Following Stickney's return to custody, concerns and allegations about the state's foster care system have surfaced.

Bill Young of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) commented on the criticisms, saying, "I am in constant awe that teenagers can present a wide variety of issues — including some we didn't expect. I suspect there are peripheral issues we can't even begin to discuss because of the privacy act, but oftentimes with any situation what you see isn't what you get, and this community needs to be sensitive to that before they start pointing fingers at anyone."

Outright Vermont, a Burlington-based group whose mission is to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth and to increase societal awareness of their issues, hopes that the Stickney case will highlight the need for increased sensitivity in departments such as SRS and the local school systems.

Other gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals and organizations around the state have expressed both concern and support for Stickney. For many, the incidents served as a reminder of the link between sexism and homophobia, as well as the powerful forces of oppression still present in many of society's institutions. ▼

Washington's Double Whammy: DOMA Signed Into Law; ENDA Defeated

by Hugh Coyle

WASHINGTON DC -- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people across the nation were dealt a one-two punch with the U.S. Senate's passage of the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" (DOMA) and the narrow defeat of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which had been cosponsored by Vermont Senator James Jeffords (R). President Clinton signed the measure into law at 12:50 a.m. on Saturday, September 21.

DOMA passed on an 85-14 vote, while ENDA perished with a close 49-50 vote. Senator David Pryor of Arkansas, who had been expected to cast the tying vote for ENDA, missed the roll while visiting his son in the hospital. The younger Pryor had been recovering from cancer-related surgery.

According to Richard Socarides, White House liaison to the Gay community, Vice President Al Gore was in Pennsylvania on Tuesday and ready to fly into Washington on a helicopter in the event of a tie. He and President Clinton had hoped the gesture would restore some of the gay and lesbian electorate's wavering faith in the President. Both Clinton and Gore had also made a number of phone calls to secure votes in favor of ENDA.

The "Defense of Marriage Act" allows individual states to ignore same-sex unions performed in other states, even if such unions were made legal in those states. The Act arose in response to a pending court case in Hawaii which appears likely to give the green light to same-sex mar-

riages performed in the Aloha State. DOMA further states that the federal government shall limit its definition of marriage to the union of one man and one woman.

Though Vermont Senators Jeffords and Patrick Leahy voted in favor of ENDA, both also voted to accept DOMA. Vermonters expressed a mixture of shock and dismay upon learning that both Jeffords and Leahy voted in favor of the bill. One person even thought of calling Leahy's office to inform them that there had been an error in the reporting of the roll. Both Senators have been quite supportive of issues addressing gay and lesbian concerns.

Letters from the Senators prior to the vote, however, showed Jeffords unsure of his final stance and Leahy clearly in favor of DOMA. In a response dated August 13, Leahy wrote, "I intend to support the Defense of Marriage Act," adding, "In Vermont we have a law that recognizes marriages only between men and women. The Congress should not interfere with the right of our legislature to decide what constitutes a marriage for those who live in our state."

Opponents of DOMA claim that it violates the U.S. Constitution, which requires states to acknowledge and respect the acts of other states with "full faith and credit." The Act may eventually be tested in the courts, but not until an actual gay or lesbian marriage has been legally performed and sanctioned by an individual state.

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