

**news**

**Court continued from page 1**

means. For the immediate future, it means nothing other than that the Legislature must address the issue.

But the court spelled out some of the benefits that now must be extended to gays and lesbians in whatever statutory scheme that lawmakers devise.

Those include being able to have a say in a partner's medical decisions, or having access to life or medical insurance. It means the state must provide the same tax breaks to gay and lesbian couples as it does to married men and women. Inheritance laws will have to change. There are at least 300 places scattered throughout state statutes where marriage in and of itself confers some kind of legal rights.

Elected leaders are trying to figure out their options and all of them, from the governor down, seem to have latched on to the court's suggestion that domestic partnership might be legal.

"The Legislature will pass a

domestic partnership bill and I'm comfortable with that," Gov. Howard Dean said.

What was more interesting was what he was not comfortable with.

"It makes me uncomfortable, the same as anybody else," Dean said of gay marriage. "The 4,000-year-old tradition of heterosexual marriage being an institution is something I think you have to respect. I think there are a lot of people in this state who are uncomfortable about the concept of gay marriage."

There are thousands more who are not uncomfortable and at least some legislative leaders said they would be willing to consider enacting a marriage statute.

"I think the court has broken all barriers by clearly ruling that we have a class of individuals in Vermont who are being denied their rights and I think it is the Legislature's responsibility to correct that injustice," said Peter Shumlin, the Senate

president pro tempore.

"My own view is that realistically it's going to be much easier to pass a rights-and-benefits law than it is a marriage law, but I wouldn't rule either out."

For the time being, though, the three couples and the three lawyers who have been at the center of the storm are thrilled with the court's ruling.

"Sunday, in church, the minister said that he wished and prayed that each of us would have a Christmas filled with joy and love, and now mine will be," Puterbaugh said. ▼

Attorneys for the plaintiffs: (left to right) Beth Robinson, Mary Bonauto, and Susan Murray. Robinson and Murray are with Vermont firm Langrock Sperry and Wool. Bonauto works for Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders in Boston.



photos: Max Stroud

**Exxon/Mobil continued from page 1**

their non-discrimination policies and nearly 3,000 public and private employers provide health coverage for domestic partners. In the oil and gas industry Chevron, BP Amoco, Shell, Atlantic Richfield and Texaco have policies that include sexual orientation. Chevron, BP Amoco and Shell also offer domestic partner benefits.

ExxonMobil's decision to end Mobil's more progressive policies appears to apply only to non-union employees. Contracts between the compa-

ny and the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination clauses and provide for domestic partner benefits. The contracts will remain in effect until January 2002, but negotiations on the new benefits package will begin next month. Officials at PACE expect that the domestic partner benefits issue will be on the table, but pledged to fight any effort by the company to roll back the benefits. In the

interim, PACE officials said that they believe ExxonMobil will have to offer the benefits to new employees that will be covered under the PACE collective bargaining agreement. ExxonMobil employees covered by union contracts number approximately 5,000 nationally.

The disparity in treatment of ExxonMobil's union and non-union employees was publicized by Pride At Work, an organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender union members affiliated with the

AFL-CIO. The group works to educate the LGBT community on the benefits of union membership. "This is just one more reason why LGBT workers should organize unions and get their domestic partner benefits and non-discrimination policies included in their collective bargaining agreements," said T Santora, national co-chair of Pride At Work.

On Dec. 8, HRC Executive Director Elizabeth Birch wrote ExxonMobil Chief Executive Officer Lee R. Raymond to request a dialogue. "The mes-

sage you are sending to lesbian and gay former employees of Mobil is that it is now OK to discriminate against them in the new company," Birch wrote. As of Dec. 22, Raymond had not responded.

Meanwhile, the company has been removed from two indexes of gay-friendly companies. GLVReports & Communications announced on Dec. 9 the removal of ExxonMobil from its annual ranking of the top 100 gay-friendly companies. And gfn.com, the Gay Financial

**INSIDE *oitm* departments**

Op-Ed .....6  
 World News Briefs .....3  
 Letters .....6  
 Travel .....14  
 Health & Wellbeing .....17  
 health source .....21  
 the source .....22  
 calendar .....23  
 community compass .....24  
 Arts & Entertainment .....25  
 Gayity .....29

**columns**

20 Something .....13  
 Cybershark .....27  
 Dyke Psyche .....17  
 Faith Matters .....11  
 Legal Briefs .....11  
 Stonehenge to Stonewall .....12  
 View From the Kingdom .....10



Chat | Personals | News | Travel | Entertainment | People



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