

Valentine's becomes a day for activists to voice beliefs

BY DAVID CRARY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Chocolates and flowers still abound, but Valentine's Day is acquiring a new, politically tinged layer of symbolism: For many activists, it's now the date of choice to mobilize on matters of the heart — advocating abstinence, decrying divorce, and rallying nationwide to demand gay marriage.

Across the country, teens from hundreds of schools and youth groups will make chastity pledges Monday on the "Day of Purity," organized by the Liberty Counsel, a Florida-based conservative legal group.

In Arkansas, Gov. Mike Huckabee and his wife, Janet, will renew their wedding vows in the presence of hundreds of other couples at a ceremony promoting the state's covenant marriage law, a voluntary system that makes divorce harder to obtain. "The nation will be watching as we take a stand for marriage," the Huckabees' invitation says.

And at statehouses, courthouses and city halls nationwide, gay-rights supporters will be rallying in support of gay marriage as Valentine's Day serves as the centerpiece of Freedom to Marry Week. Similar observances have occurred annually since 1998, but this year the mood is combative as state after state moves to entrench bans on gay marriage in their constitutions.

"There's a greater appreciation this year of how much more work there still is to do," said Evan Wolfson, a gay-rights lawyer who heads the Freedom to Marry campaign. "The hits we took last year were sad

but predictable."

Last year, 13 states enacted constitutional bans on gay marriage, seeking to thwart any ripple effect from court rulings like the one that legalized same-sex marriages in Massachusetts. Legislatures in at least a half-dozen more states are considering similar bans this year; Kansas lawmakers already have placed such a ban on the ballot for a statewide vote April 5.

"We are at a moment of peril right now where our opponents are able to stampede people into adopting these discriminatory amendments, depriving them of the time to take a deep breath and embrace fairness," Wolfson said.

Monday's events include rallies for gay marriage in Milwaukee, Portland and Tampa, Fla., and at the statehouses in Maryland, New Mexico and Washington state. In Richmond, Va., gay and lesbian couples plan to apply for marriage licenses at City Hall, then be united in ceremonies performed by a minister from the Metropolitan Community Church. Same-sex couples in California plan to request marriage licenses from their county clerk's office.

A very different crowd is expected Monday evening at a North Little Rock arena for the marriage celebration in Arkansas, where voters overwhelmingly approved a gay-marriage ban last year.

Huckabee, in a telephone interview, said he wants to make more Arkansans aware of covenant marriage — an option in which couples pledge to go through lengthy counseling before any divorce, unless there is a dramatic factor such as physical abuse.

"We're trying to combat the idea that covenant marriage is some kind of holier-than-thou religious act," Huckabee said. "It's an admission on our part that keeping a marriage together is very hard work; it's a commitment that if the marriage hits a crisis, we'll see counselors before we see lawyers — and see if we can work it out."

Arkansas has one of the nation's highest divorce rates. Thus far, few couples have exercised the option of covenant marriage — about 600 in three years out of roughly 40,000 marriages that occur annually in the state.

Organizers of the Day of Purity, being held for the second time, said young people from roughly 2,000 schools and church groups have signed up to participate. They are encouraged to wear white T-shirts as a symbol of purity and to hand out flyers to fellow students on such topics as promiscuity and sexually transmitted disease.

"Students are bombarded with the message that they should become sexually active at a young age and to experiment with their sexual preferences," organizers said in a statement. "The Day of Purity offers the youth who strive for sexual purity an opportunity to stand in opposition to a culture of moral decline."

School officials and teachers in some communities were wary of promoting the Day of Purity for fear it would be seen as a religious activity, she said.

Why choose Valentine's Day for the event?

"The focus is so much on going out on that special date," Lindevaldsen said. "It's a good time to be thinking about making wise choices."

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