

Juvenile court referee under fire

by Pat Scott

In August, the Multnomah County district attorney's office filed an affidavit asking that Katharine English, an avowed lesbian, be dismissed as Juvenile Court Referee, charging that her "personal experiences and strongly held views . . . render her completely unable to provide the state and abused and neglected children with a fair hearing." The attempt to unseat English was dismissed but is currently under appeal to the State Supreme Court.

Regardless of the Supreme Court findings, the state has promised to appeal every possible ruling by English in delinquency cases if she continues to preside. This maneuver would so tie up the court that English would quickly become a severe liability.

Though both English and the state maintain they serve the best interests of the children and their families it's obvious there is vast disagreement over what those "best interests" are. The state complains that English ignores recommendations by CSD (Children's Services Division), that too often her focus is on treatment and rehabilitation rather than punishment, and that she is overzealous in her attempts to keep the family unit together.

Actually, English contends that in 80 percent of the cases she is in agreement with recommendations by Children's Services Division. But the other 20 percent may cost her job.

The state maintains that Referee English is prejudiced, that her own childhood experiences with physical and sexual abuse while remaining in an alcoholic home has rendered her incapable of making an unbiased decision.

"What it has done," English counters, "is made me more interested in the damage that removal might have on children, versus the damage of remaining in the home. . . . There's a lot of debate about this now: whether a sick family, struggling it out together, isn't better than a split-up family with no plans for reintegration." Though not at risk of endangering the children, English is quick to continue.

Certainly English is an innovator, an advocate for change — something else CSD is not happy with. "What I do that they object to," English says, "is I require immediate services to the family; I require reports much more frequently on what's happening to that child in foster care, and what's happening to rehabilitate the family. In instances of sex abuse, I have been requiring the offender to be removed from the home and not the victim."

English is careful of the family unit. Treatment and reintegration back into the home are prime considerations. "There's a new Federal law that requires all reasonable efforts be made to prevent the break-up of the family. . . . While that law doesn't mandate me as a judge to keep families together, it does mandate me to make a finding stating whether or not Children's Services Division has made reasonable efforts to prevent removal of the child and, once removed, to return the child home. And I've found that they have not made reasonable efforts to keep the family together more often than any other referee or judge that's sat on the bench out here."

Although CSD and the state have found her decisions faulty and her manner abrasive, English is proud of her time on the bench. "I feel badly this happened at this particular time because I already saw changes. I can think of several cases right offhand where we did have to remove the children immediately, but I kept such close track of those cases that the kids were back in their homes with their families within three or four months, with the families being offered everything at CSD's command because I kept setting these re-

view hearings and requiring CSD to come forward and prove what had been done."

Of the resistance of CSD and the state English says, "The state, CSD and the juvenile court counselors used to be the ultimate decision makers. It wasn't fair; it wasn't equitable. Now children and parents have more rights in helping decide what's best for the family.

"Oregon has the third highest rate in the country of kids entering foster care placement. We have the second highest number of black children entering foster care. These are shocking statistics; a lot of abuses I see could have been corrected."

In statements made by the state the suggestion has been that English herself has been guilty of child abuse, that she promotes child abuse, condones drug and alcohol abuse, and is soft on criminals. English vehemently denies these allegations. Being an "out front lesbian" as well as an advocate for change has brought her under heavy fire within the system. "If those things had been rumored about any sitting judge," she replies, "particularly a white, middle class, male sitting judge, nobody would have believed it. But if the rumor is about me, well, people are much more willing to believe it without checking it out — because they believe lesbians are weird anyway. I mean, all of that, however unconsciously, is going on, and it manifests itself in their ability to get so caught up in this representation of me that is so utterly false. And to that extent, I think it has to do with my being a lesbian."

All this is not to say that English has no regard for the state, CSD, and the juvenile counselors. Their jobs are difficult, resources are limited and burnout is always a problem. "If I were a social worker and I were in CSD, I would probably feel the same way they did," English acknowledges, "but the mistake comes when they think they have the only answer as to what is best for children."

In retrospect, would English change her approach?

"I think the children and families in this state need somebody who is as tough and aggressive and unflappable as me on the bench."

"If I'm sitting in a judge's chair, in a judge's robe, it is for me the right thing to do to force people to comply with the law, and the fact that the system out there beats me at it doesn't make it not the right thing. Justice doesn't always prevail," English admits, "but that doesn't make it not justice; it simply makes it defeated."

Phoenix Rising broadens service base

The Phoenix Rising Foundation has been serving Portland's lesbian and gay community for eight years. As the nation's first gay/lesbian tax-exempt foundation, Phoenix Rising planned to expand and change to meet the needs of the people it was formed to serve.

Surviving on donations and volunteer labor, Phoenix Rising has maintained a model counseling center, speakers bureau and referral service, setting the standard for similar service centers throughout the U.S.

Phoenix Rising has gained a reputation of professional integrity by retaining counselors with master and doctorate degrees to conduct groups, workshops, and individual counseling sessions.

The foundation's speakers bureau has been called upon to conduct seminars for Multnomah County Health Department employees and to speak at universities, high schools, and businesses throughout the Pacific Northwest providing the most accurate and up to date information available about lesbians and gay men.

Phoenix Rising maintains the largest gay referral list in Portland and receives calls daily for referrals to gay-owned businesses and to gay professionals.

Last year, the need for gay people to submerge themselves in a totally gay environment prompted Phoenix Rising to begin sponsoring retreats at Breitenbush Hot Springs. The second annual Women in the Woods took place last August, and the first annual Men in the Woods will take place in November. The retreats provide gay people with the opportunity to relate on a level not possible within heterosexual society.

An introduction service, Dear Phoebe, was started this year to meet the many requests Phoenix Rising received for such a service. For a \$25 fee Phoebe will introduce people to potential friends, gin rummy partners, roommates or whomever they would like to meet.

In addition to their regular groups and workshops, Phoenix Rising is planning workshops that will focus on social, non-problem

and health issues. Topics include "How to Survive in Social Situations," "Stop Smoking Now," and "Coping with Death and Dying." Future workshops will include such topics as sports psychology, and chemical dependency.

Administratively Phoenix Rising has been changing too. The Director of Counseling position has been revamped to focus more on program development and supervision of counseling services. The Administrator position has been changed to Executive Director and a part-time Administrative Assistant has been added to the staff.

Phoenix Rising is in the process of doing outreach within the mainstream community and within the gay community in order to generate awareness of all the services it provides. To some Phoenix Rising is "just a counseling center," when in fact it is a full service center for gay men and lesbians, focusing on mental health as well as education, referrals, and providing the kind of place where friends meet friends.

Lesbian Forum sets Fall/Winter dates

by Willow

In May the Lesbian Forum celebrated four years of bringing to the Lesbian community a supportive, women-only atmosphere in which to explore topics of interest to Lesbians and gay-positive women.

A volunteer planning committee meets once monthly to plan the Lesbian Forum. Of course, outreach into the community is a must to gather information, enlist the experts to appear on panels and keep the Lesbian network alive and energetic. The brainstorming sessions alone are worth an evening commitment, even in those times of overburdened calendars and occasional burn-out. Many Lesbian Forum planners have expressed that involvement in the Forum has

afforded them new insights into subjects previously unexplored, taught them skills in organization and planning, and opened up new channels socially.

With the above in mind, consider attending an informal brunch potluck sponsored by the Lesbian Forum on Sunday, October 20, 11:00 a.m. Call Willow at 236-4386 or Peggy at 223-0261 for location. In addition to lots of good food and conversation with friends old and new, we'll talk about the Lesbian Forum as a Portland "institution," hear *your* input on what you think of the Forum and how it might improve, and hopefully interest some of you to join the planning committee. We'd like to see former Forum planners there, to reminisce about favorite Forums in the past and keep those networking skills sharp! Women of color and differently-abled women are especially urged to attend, as we'd like to know how we can serve you better.

Thanks for your continued support and interest in the Lesbian Forum. See you at the brunch!

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