

Just news

Activists plot course for Gay '90s

"We need better communication, better grass roots mobilization, and we need to become more serious political players."

—Urvashi Vaid
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

BY REX WOCKNER

In a weekend highlighted by renewed focus on the anti-gay policies of the U. S. military, more than 500 leading activists from 33 states strategized in suburban Washington November 9-12 at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force "Creating Change" conference.

Among the featured guests was former U. S. Army staff sergeant Perry Watkins, who was booted from the military for being gay in 1982, 15 years after he first told his superiors he was a homosexual.

Following Watkins's spirited Veteran's Day address to the gathering, some 200 activists converged on the White House to demand that the military treat gays and straights equally. Pentagon policy states that homosexuality is "incompatible with military service" because, among other things, it leads to a "breakdown in morale and discipline." Watkins's case is still winding through the courts.

Workshops at the second annual confab ran the gamut from practical to philosophical. While a group attending "Media 101" intently took notes on the differences between a "press release," a "media advisory" and a "backgrounder," activists next door were "Unlearning Sexism" and "Organizing Against Violence."

Other sessions discussed "Gay and Lesbian Seniors," "Teaching Them About Us," "Working With Law Enforcement," "Lobbying 101," and "De-Gaying and Re-Gaying AIDS."

The conference is an outgrowth of 1988's "War Conference" in rural Virginia. At that event, 200 leading activists gathered by invitation only to respond to the "war" against gays and lesbians by conservative politicians,

fundamentalist Christians and others.

But unlike the Was Conference, NGLTF's event is open to anyone and is designed to attract both neophyte activists from Boise, Idaho and sophisticated old-timers from New York.

"This is the only time that virtually everybody who is anybody working full-time in the movement gets together and talks politics," said NGLTF executive director Urvashi Vaid. "The leadership of gay and lesbian America is here and that's very exciting."

As the conference convened amidst the distraction of East Germany, conferees also had to face the news that three days earlier gays lost all five gay-related voters' referenda that were on election ballots around the country — including San Francisco's landmark domestic partner ordinance.

According to Vaid, "We're only going to continue to face such referenda in the '90s and that makes this conference all the more important. To beat these things," she said, "we need better communication, better grass roots mobilization, and we need to become more serious political players."

Gay celebrities attending included author Vito Russo, former NGLTF head Virginia Apuzzo, PWA Coalition founder Michael Callen, historian John D'Emilio, feminist author Charlotte Bunch, Shanti Project's Eric Rofes, International Lesbian and Gay Association secretariat general Lisa Power, Catholic activist Brian McNaught, historian Allan Berube, and contingents from all major U. S. gay rights organizations.

Next year's conference will be held in Minneapolis and the gathering will move around the country every second year thereafter.

conclusion is that the military services will soon be asked by the courts of the Congress to re-examine their policies and practices regarding recruitment and retention of men and women whose sexual interests deviate from the customary."

The PERSEREC report invites Congressional intervention to drag the Pentagon kicking and screaming into the 1990s. Urge your Congressional representatives to work for rescission of the DoD policy of exclusion and discharge. This policy, which declares that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service," was established in 1943 and has accounted for the early discharges — many of them under less than honorable conditions — of 100,000 men and women. Additionally, a 1989 Gallup poll indicated that 60 percent of respondents believed that gay men and lesbians should be allowed to serve in the Armed Forces.

Addresses and telephone numbers for congresspersons are listed in the blue pages of local telephone directories under the congresspersons' names; Senators: Mark O. Hatfield and Bob Packwood; Representatives: Les AuCoin, Bob Smith, Ron Wyden, Peter DeFazio, and Denny Smith.

Action alert: military gays and lesbians need your help now

Following the release on October 18 of "Nonconforming Sexual Orientations and Military Suitability," an internal Department of Defense (DoD) report which openly criticizes the DoD policy of excluding and discharging gay men and lesbians from the Armed Forces, the Pentagon is extremely vulnerable to political pressure to rescind its homophobic and dangerous policy.

Senators and Representatives need to hear from constituents that the Pentagon must implement all recommendations of the PERSEREC report, authored by Theodore Sarbin and Kenneth Karols. The authors state, "Under prevailing social conditions, a public admission of homosexuality carries less stigma than in earlier times, and is no legal bar to most employment....Our studied

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