

national news

Postcard campaign targets United Nations

The U.N. Postcard Campaign is petitioning that body's General Assembly to demand equal rights for all gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Organizers want the United Nations to amend Article II of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include the words "sexual orientation." The campaign is gathering signed postcards and will deliver 1 million of them to the General Assembly during the fall session.

Some 3.5 million cards have been mailed to over 2,500 lesbian and gay organizations nationwide. Over 1 million cards have been mailed to bookstores and community centers. The returns are now totaling over 1,000 postcards per day.

Some of the organizations distributing the postcards are Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in Denver, Colo., Los Angeles, Calif., and Puerto Rico; the Atlantic Coast Democratic Club in West Palm Beach, Fla.; and Dignity, New York. Persons and organizations interested in distributing cards may contact: the U.N. Postcard Campaign, 245 Eighth Ave., Suite 217, New York, NY 10011, (212) 966-5876.

West Coast festival celebrates 15 years

1994 marks the 15th anniversary of the West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival. The festival will be held Thursday through Monday, Sept. 1 to 5, in North Hills, Calif.

This year the entertainment runs all day and all evening, and includes a wide variety of performances. From household names to newer faces, from rock 'n' roll to jazz rap, the festival stage will present a star-studded line-up throughout the weekend.

Performers this year will be Cris Williamson, Holly Near, Teresa Trull, Dianne Davidson, Georgia Ragsdale, Suzanne Westenhoefer, Diane Amos, Mimi Freed, Lynda Montgomery, Sally Landers and the Fixations, Laura Love, and Strange Fruit.

The festival setting is a private, wooded camp, near Yosemite National Park. The site boasts a lake, a pool and a river, and women may camp, stay in cabins or use RVs. Activities will include dances, workshops, sports, a crafts fair, hiking and fishing. Festival organizers anticipate over 3,000 women for this anniversary celebration.

San Diego extends benefits to domestic partners

The San Diego City Council voted in mid-May to extend health insurance and other benefits to

domestic partners of lesbian, gay and heterosexual city employees. City workers will pay for the partner insurance with a payroll deduction.

City Councilor and out lesbian Christine Kehoe sponsored the measure. She called it "a fairness issue" and urged private businesses to follow suit.

Mayor Susan Golding, a member of the City Council, voted against the benefits. She said she opposed the plan because it recognizes relationships of as little as three months' duration.

Thirty U.S. cities currently recognize unmarried couples, in a variety of ways. Several corporations offer benefits to lovers of gay and lesbian employees, among them The New York Times, Lotus, Levi Strauss, and Ben & Jerry's.

The California state Assembly approved in May a measure to allow gay and lesbian couples to register their relationships and to receive some benefits. That legislation has now moved to the Senate.

Court ruling revives transsexual inmate's suit

The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled to limit the legal responsibility of prison officials regarding the treatment of inmates, at the same time warning officials they could be forced to pay damages for ignoring obvious risks to a prisoner's health or safety. Both prison officials and inmates are claiming a victory, due to the flexibility of the ruling.

The Court's decision allows the case of a 28-year-old transsexual inmate to be reopened. Dee Farmer was allegedly beaten and raped after being placed in a federal penitentiary heavily populated by violent men.

The case hinged on the meaning of "deliberate indifference." State and federal officials argued that it meant an inmate must prove officials actually knew of the danger and ignored it. Inmates such as Farmer argued that it was sufficient to show that prison officials should have been aware of the risks. Justice David H. Souter rejected Farmer's argument but allowed him to return to a federal trial court to try to prove his case under the new ruling.

Farmer was born a male, and began undergoing estrogen therapy at 14. He later received silicone breast implants and underwent surgery to remove his testicles.

"We can now prove that the prison at Terre Haute [Indiana] has a long history as a dangerous place and is thus a greater risk for sexual assault. We could also prove statistically that people with feminine characteristics like Dee Farmer tend to be victims of predatory behavior," said Alvin J. Bronstein of the ACLU's National Prison Project, and Farmer's lawyer.

Supreme court refuses Metzger appeal

The U.S. Supreme Court refused in May to hear the appeal of Tom Metzger, his son John, and their White Aryan Resistance organization. The family of the late Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian man murdered by Portland Skinheads, can finally begin to collect the \$12.5 million damages awarded by a Multnomah County jury four years ago.

Just days before Seraw was killed, his attackers were in the company of a man whom Metzger had sent to Portland as a recruiter for his organization. Jurors learned during the 1990 trial that the recruiter encouraged the Skinheads, members of East Side White Pride, to assault African Americans and other minorities. The link was enough to persuade jurors to give the Seraw estate every cent asked for in the suit: \$1 million from the three men who killed Seraw and \$11.5 from the Metzgers and their organization.

The money awarded is largely symbolic. The awards, which will go to Seraw's son, Henock, who lives with his mother and grandfather in Ethiopia, will be paid from a trust account of \$100,000 resulting from the seizure of the Metzger's California home and a percentage of contributions from followers. Ironically, those same followers who subscribe to Metzger's racist propaganda will now be helping to pay for some of the damage it has caused.

Grave discrimination

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—we all eventually confront the fact of our own mortality. For people living with AIDS, thought of burial or cremation may come sooner than for others. At 43, Raymond Paul is one of these people.

"Both Richard and I decided that we wanted to buy our own grave," said Paul. "There are family plots, but you get all involved with who is going to go where. So, we decided to avoid that whole thing and just buy our own." Paul has lived with his partner Richard Creede for 20 years. They planned to be buried together in their own family plot.

Paul came upon Greenfield Cemetery while driving near his home in Hempstead, N.Y., on Long Island. The cemetery is owned and operated by the town. Because space is at a premium, burial is restricted to residents of the town and their blood relatives.

"I drove in. It was nice. I talked to the man. He gave me a price of \$725, plus whatever expenses. That's a good deal," Paul said. Creede liked it too. About a week later they went back to fill out the papers.

"The guy said that only married people and blood relatives can be buried in the same plot. That's just the way it is. He suggested we buy two

plots right next to each other. We just left," said Paul. "We weren't about to buy two plots."

"We've lived in the town of Hempstead for 16 years. When they were collecting taxes, they didn't ask me if I was married," Paul pointed out.



The couple called their lawyer, who referred them to Beatrice Dohrn, legal director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. She decided to take the case.

"We are always looking for state action because constitutional provisions like the 14th Amendment don't come into play until you have a state actor," explained Dohrn. "This was a municipality that was really very directly doing the acting, it was a clear state public accommodation."

She said, "Usually on public accommodations you are dealing with something where we have to argue there is a state action, because it is not directly the state acting but maybe the state helps fund something." But this was clear and direct, and that made it a good potential case.

Dohrn thought a phone call or two might clear up the situation. The two were tax-paying residents of the town for 16 years, she said, "being deprived of an equal benefit that would arise from the fact that they paid taxes." And, even if the matter went to litigation and lost, there was tremendous educational potential for the case.

After more than a few phone calls, and several exchanges of letters, the town of Hempstead guardedly agreed to treat Paul and Creede like any other family and sell them a family burial plot. The difference was that the town demanded the pair sign an affidavit saying they would use the plot only for themselves and would not transfer it to anyone else.

The men and Dohrn bristled at the affidavit because no one else is forced to sign one. But they eventually agreed to it because it did not impinge on their intent. They had won the major battle.

"We were told that other people have been turned down, and they just walked away," Paul said. "We are the first ones who didn't walk away."

Compiled by Jann Gilbert and Bob Roehr

cathartic comics I featuring The Brown Bomber and Diva Touché Flambé by Prof. I.B. Gittendowne

