

Pressure stepped up in Georgia

Lesbian daughter of Cobb County Commission chairman leads protest at meeting

by Richard Shumate

Led by the lesbian daughter of the Cobb County (Ga.) Commission, opponents of the county's resolution discriminatory to sexual minorities have taken their protest directly to commissioners.

On March 28, during a period set aside for public comment at a commission meeting, 14 demonstrators got up and surrounded the podium while two speakers, including Shannon Byrne, the daughter of chairman Bill Byrne, denounced the resolution. The other speaker, Jim Stark, symbolically handcuffed himself to the microphone, then threw the handcuffs on the floor in front of the podium, saying that gay men and lesbians "refused to be handcuffed" by the resolution.

The most emotional moment, however, came when Shannon Byrne, who last summer publicly announced that she is a lesbian and denounced her father's action in voting for the resolution, addressed Bill Byrne and his fellow commissioners. Except for a brief conversation several months ago, it was the first time she had spoken to her father since her public declaration.

"It seemed like a real good time to remind them that I'm still here," she said later. "I told them that they are sacrificing their families for the sake of their political careers, when they are supposedly protecting 'family values.'"

As protesters began to leave the room, Bill Byrne asked his daughter to return to the podium. He said he was proud of her and praised her "guts, articulation and candor."

"I do believe that he is proud of me, but I don't take what he said full-heartedly," Shannon Byrne said. "He probably felt it was in his political interest for him to address me."

In August 1993 the county commissioners, by a 4-to-1 vote, passed a resolution saying that the "gay lifestyle" was incompatible with the community standards of Cobb County, a conservative suburban enclave of 450,000 people just northwest of Atlanta. The ensuing controversy cost the county the opportunity to host the volleyball competition in the 1996 Olympics.

The particular issue that brought the demonstrators to the commission meeting on March 28

was a public promise made by Commissioner Gordon Wysong, the author of the resolution.

Speaking at a candidates forum during his successful re-election bid last fall, Wysong said his motivation for proposing the resolution was a decision by the city of Atlanta to pass domestic partnership legislation. He said that if the Georgia Supreme Court struck down that legislation, he would support rescinding the resolution.

On March 14, the Supreme Court struck down an ordinance extending benefits to the domestic partners of city employees. It upheld a separate ordinance creating a partnership registry.

Now, Wysong is saying that the resolution is a "dead issue" and that his earlier statement was misunderstood.

"He seems to have gotten amnesia over this item," says Noel Lytle, co-chair of the Cobb Citizens Coalition, made up of local residents opposed to the resolution. "We wanted to remind him to keep his promise."

Since the Supreme Court's decision, members of the coalition have spoken with the lone opponent of the resolution, Commissioner Bill Cooper, who pledged to bring up repealing the measure privately with his colleagues. But he appears to be the only commissioner interested in revisiting the issue.

During the same week that demonstrators addressed commissioners, the coalition also began running a series of educational ads on Atlanta's two largest talk radio stations—including the station that airs right-wing talkmeister Rush Limbaugh.

The three commercials are designed to combat three myths about gay men and lesbians: that they are child molesters, that they are interested in special rights, and that sexual orientation is a choice, according to Elaine Hill, co-chair of the coalition.

Hill says other actions are planned, including a major demonstration on Mother's Day, to which gay men and lesbians are asked to bring their mothers.

"We're going to keep the pressure on," says Hill.

Finger-lickin' bigotry

African American civil rights leaders and gay, lesbian and bisexual activists have joined forces in Louisville, Ky., to protest alleged racial and homophobic practices at Kentucky Fried Chicken. The fast food chain's corporate headquarters are located in Louisville.

A citywide picket and boycott of KFC restaurants has been organized by the Justice Resource Center, a group of ministers and civil rights activists led by the Rev. Louis Coleman. Center members and their allies have picketed outside the restaurants every Saturday for the past several weeks.

Evidence of discrimination came to light in 1992 when a Louisville KFC restaurant manager, Denise Bentley, was asked to fire an employee because he was gay. Bentley had hired the employee because of his efficient and courteous work manner. She refused to terminate him.



"I felt if I had to terminate this person based on their sexual orientation, then I was opening up Pandora's box and giving KFC the opportunity to terminate anybody for any reason.... It's not an acceptable practice," said Bentley.

The employee was later fired by a KFC representative on Bentley's day off.

Bentley herself was targeted after the incident. When she tried to return to work in 1993 following a work-related injury she was not rehired, although she says the company had guaranteed her position during her recovery. Bentley is now filing a lawsuit charging

KFC with discrimination based on her disability and race. Bentley is African American.

The issue has intensified feelings in the local gay community due to a pending vote on a gay rights ordinance. The measure would ban employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

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