

## Dance to the music

*The Supreme Court decision on Amendment 2 clears the way for the community to focus on proactive issues*

by Inga Sorensen

**T**his has undeniably been a season to celebrate.

After all, within the past several weeks the nation's highest court struck down Colorado's anti-gay Amendment 2. Soon after, the Oregon Citizens Alliance announced it was abandoning its signature drive to place another statewide anti-gay-rights initiative on the November ballot. And OCA leader Lon Mabon garnered a tepid 8 percent of the Republican primary vote in his failed bid for the U.S. Senate. Not a bad way to kick off the summer.

"But there's still plenty of things for people who are concerned with gay and lesbian rights to do," says Bonnie Tinker, executive director of Love Makes a Family Inc., a Portland-based group that promotes the visibility and rights of lesbian and gay families.

Tinker is also co-chair of the recently established Oregon Freedom to Marry Coalition, whose aim is to provide accurate information and increase public awareness regarding legal marriage for same-sex couples.

The coalition, whose members include political activists, clergy, attorneys, parents and others, seeks to do so by, among other things, hosting public forums where the issue of marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples can be discussed "hopefully, in a thoughtful manner," says Tinker.

The matter is currently being mulled over in forums nationwide. Bills to prohibit legal marriage for same-gender couples have already been introduced—and a handful have become law—in several states.

There is also movement at the federal level: The so-called Defense of Marriage Act was introduced in early May by U.S. Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.), and Sen. Don Nickles (R-Okla.). The legislation would define marriage in federal law as a "legal union between one man and one woman."

It also attempts to give states the authority to reject the legality of same-sex marriages performed in other states, though such marriages are not yet legal in any state.

The bill was recently approved by the U.S. House Judiciary Committee and is headed to the full House for a vote. President Clinton says he opposes equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian Americans and has said he will sign the bill into law.

The congressional bill and the 30-plus measures introduced in state legislatures across the country this year are in reaction to a pending Hawaii legal case that many observers believe will ultimately provide same-gender couples with access to the legal contract of marriage in Hawaii.

The Hawaii State Supreme Court is expected to render a decision soon on the constitutional issue of whether gay men and lesbians have a legal right to marry in the state. However, it may take another two years before the case fully winds its way through the courts.

In Oregon, Mabon has made public his future intentions of pushing a measure prohibiting same-gender marriages. Conversely, state Rep. George Eighmey (D-Portland), has made noises about introducing a bill next session granting equal marriage rights to same-gender couples.

"This is a legal and economic issue, first and foremost. As it stands, gays and lesbians cannot legally marry and therefore cannot file joint tax returns and cannot obtain joint health insurance," says Jon Terry, a Portland attorney and co-chair of the Oregon Freedom to Marry Coalition. "[They] cannot inherit automatically in the absence of a will or right to survivorship, cannot obtain such benefits as Social Security or Medicare, cannot obtain wrongful death benefits for a surviving partner and children, cannot take bereavement leave when a partner or child dies and cannot make medical decisions for partners."

"This is much like the 'gays in the military' issue," says Melinda Paras, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Paras was in Portland recently, where she addressed, among other topics, the marriage question.

"No matter how you feel about the military or the institution of marriage, gay men and lesbians should have the same rights as heterosexuals. Barring us is discrimination, plain and simple. And discrimination is wrong," she says.

NGLTF has released a marriage organizing manual called "To Have and to Hold," which is available for \$10.

"It's just one tool people can use as they begin to organize around what is a somewhat contentious issue," says Paras. "We want to offer what support we can to all of the

admirable grass-roots efforts taking place across the country."

Tinker says, "We think this is the kind of issue that will capture folks' imagination." Not simply classic activists, she adds, but gay and lesbian parents and couples who may not have been involved in, for example, fighting anti-gay initiatives.

She says the Oregon Freedom to Marry Coalition is currently seeking volunteers to get involved in a variety of projects. The group plans to gather and archive information from gay and lesbian couples who have had commitment ceremonies.

"We will archive that information here. It will be a record of who, what, when, where. When heterosexuals marry there is automatically a record of their union, but we don't have anything like that. This is a way of collectively acknowledging our relationships and creating a historical record," she says.

"We're also looking for couples who may be willing to talk to the press, and we've sent a letter to print media in Oregon asking them if they have a policy regarding printing same-sex couples' commitment ceremonies. We could use folks to work on all of these projects," Tinker says.

The coalition is also planning a Freedom to Marry Summit for July 27, to be held at the First Unitarian Church in Portland. The all-day event will address a variety of issues pertaining to same-sex marriage.

For registration information or to volunteer for the Oregon Freedom to Marry Coalition, call Bonnie Tinker at 228-3892 or Jon Terry at 248-1063. To receive a copy of NGLTF's marriage organizing manual, call (202) 332-6483.

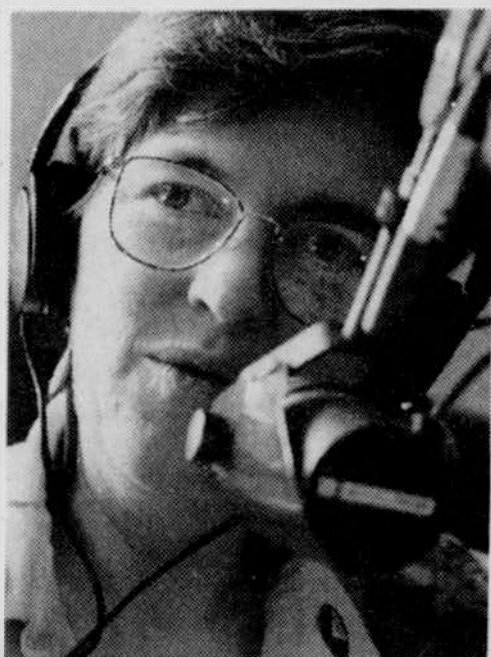


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