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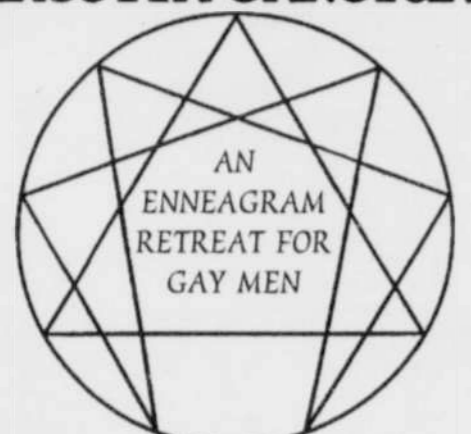
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local news

Can't-marry-me bill

The Washington Legislature votes to define marriage as explicitly heterosexual, but Gov. Locke vows to veto

by Inga Sorensen

Washington is on the verge of officially jumping on the anti-same-sex marriage bandwagon. During a vote on Feb. 12, the Republican-controlled Washington state Senate approved Senate Bill 5398, which defines marriage as the union between a man and a woman and says same-sex marriages performed elsewhere will not be recognized in the Evergreen State. A few days later the GOP-dominated House followed suit, approving the ban by a 63-35 vote. State Rep. Don Carlson of Vancouver was the only Republican House member to oppose the bill, while eight Democrats voted in favor.

Democratic Gov. Gary Locke called the legislation unnecessary, citing an existing state court ruling against equal marriage rights for same-gender couples.

The governor says he'll veto the bill, but ban supporters vow to attempt an override, which requires a two-thirds vote of both chambers. (Political observers say proponents do not have the necessary votes for an override.)

If that effort falters, Senate Majority Leader Dan McDonald (R-Bellevue) said legislators will bypass Locke by putting the proposal on the November ballot.

Another anti-same-sex marriage measure, SB 5400, is waiting in the wings. It resembles SB 5398 except that it includes a referendum clause, meaning if approved by lawmakers it circumvents a gubernatorial veto and goes directly to the people for a vote.

Despite SB 5398's overwhelming passage, several legislators voiced their distaste for the bill.

Sen. Pat Thibaudeau (D-Seattle) who represents a Capitol Hill district that encompasses a substantial lesbian and gay population, dubbed the legislation "unfair" and "discriminatory."

Mike Heavy, another Seattle Democrat, blasted the bill for "picking on a minority group."

The Senate and House votes came a week after both chambers held hearings on anti-same-sex marriage bills.

During those hearings, ban proponents called upon lawmakers to "protect marriage" and civilization from gay men and lesbians, who were tagged as "child molesters" and "abominations unto the Lord," among other things. Those who testified in favor of the ban included a self-described former lesbian who said she had been "delivered" from homosexuality by her faith in Jesus Christ.

On the flip side, lesbian and gay families and their allies appealed for understanding and tolerance. During testimony, an 11-year-old daughter of lesbian parents asked: "Why are people so afraid of our family?"

Washington Rep. Ed Murray (D-Seattle) and his partner, Michael Schiosaki, both testified against the bills, and the League of Women Voters released a statement which read, in

part: "Citizens have already refused to sign initiatives that would legalize discrimination against gay and lesbian people. These bills single out gay and lesbian couples unfairly and equate them with criminal bigamists and those committing incest."

In response to the anti-same-sex marriage bills, Murray has introduced House Bill 1203, which would extend equal marriage rights to same-sex couples. It is not expected to receive a hearing.

The same day that Washington senators moved to prohibit same-sex marriages, Mississippi Gov. Kirk Fordice signed legislation making his state the 17th to ban such unions, which he called "perverse."



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BTC is growing strong

Beyond the Closet, a Bend-based lesbian and gay organization, has received grants totaling \$23,350 thus far for 1997. That figure is more than the group's entire budget for last year.

BTC, which is less than three years old, has been hailed as a model organization for advancing better understanding of gay men and lesbians in rural communities.

"Speaking positively about lesbian and gay people in rural communities is a controversial act. Because of that we make efforts to conduct our efforts with respect to the sensibilities of the community at large," says Bruce Amsbary, BTC's founder and president.

Amsbary says BTC's ability to attract grant support is clearly bolstered by such an approach.

BTC was asked to be a local sponsor for the upcoming performance of the Native Alaskan theater troupe Naa Kahidi Theater. The organization received a \$2,250 grant from the Western States Arts Federation of New Mexico to assist in bringing the troupe to Central Oregon in March.

It also received a \$6,500 grant from the Territory Resource of Seattle to help with that effort, and to operate its newly opened office located in the Oregon Street Mall in downtown Bend.

Amsbary hopes the office will eventually grow into a resource center involving a number of gay and lesbian organizations.

BTC has also received a \$10,000 grant from the Gill Foundation of Colorado to establish a major membership development program.

The most recent grant award of \$4,600 comes from the Seattle-based Pride Foundation. That money will be used to organize two statewide tours of rural communities. Previous BTC tours have featured onetime neo-Nazi Aryan Nations leader Floyd Cochran, and Bill Crews, one of the nation's nine openly gay mayors.

Other programs in the works for 1997 include a spring caucus of rural sexual minority activists from throughout the state, the second annual membership meeting and board elections in June, and a fall conference on homosexuality and Christianity. Funding is also being sought for a pilot project to identify and serve the needs of rural sexual minority youth.

For more information about Beyond the Closet, call (541) 317-8966, or write PO Box 1521, Bend, OR 97709. BTC's e-mail address is btc@empnet.com

Compiled by Inga Sorensen