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national news

School's "safe zone" doesn't extend to teacher

A group of concerned citizens and impromptu activists are rallying around Veronica Berrill, a 71-year-old Brookfield, Conn., high school teacher who spoke out against anti-gay harassment in her classroom only to be accused of "homosexual recruitment" and "promoting a homosexual agenda."

According to a press statement released by the Committee for the Defense of Classroom Tolerance, several weeks after Berrill established her classroom as a "safe zone" where sexual minority youth would be assured of safety and acceptance, the parents of one of her students made false statements to school officials and local media saying that Berrill was a "homosexual teacher looking for fresh recruits."

The committee was formed to generate financial and emotional support for Berrill's libel suit against her accusers, and to address the ongoing need for fair and equal treatment of all students and educators regardless of sexual orientation. The committee says fund raising is a priority at this point, as the defense team has amassed legal and monetary support from a number of right-wing organizations, including the Rev. Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice and the Family Institute of Connecticut. Court



Veronica Berrill

documents submitted by the defense attempt to vilify Berrill and the Safe Zones program by linking them to pornographers, child abusers and sexual predators.

Contributions to the Committee for the Defense of Classroom Tolerance may be sent to 36 Tamarack Ave., PO Box 311, Danbury, CT 06811. For more information, or for help in sponsoring a fund-raising party, call Ted LaBonne at (203) 743-5552.

GLMA denounces HIV Prevention Act

The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association announced in a press release April 28 its opposition to the HIV Prevention Act sponsored by U.S. Rep. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) and endorsed by the American Medical Association. Provisions of the bill stipulate the creation of a national database of HIV-positive individuals, permit health care providers to test patients for HIV before performing medical procedures, and allow testing of individuals charged with sexual offenses. The group also rejects a similar bill introduced in the Senate by Don Nichols (R-Okla.).

GLMA, a national organization of more than 1,800 physicians, says the measure is costly and will do nothing to stop the spread of HIV. It says the bill would encourage the denial of care to patients who are or are perceived to be at risk for HIV; withhold millions of federal Medicaid dollars to force state compliance; and, under the guise of protection for sexual assault survivors, mandate testing of persons accused of sex crimes.

Meanwhile, after more than two years of planning and preparation, GLMA has released the premiere issue of the *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association*, the world's first peer-

reviewed, multidisciplinary periodical dedicated to sexual minority health concerns. The journal will be published quarterly and will focus on original clinical research, but it will also print review articles, topical essays and commentaries.

Rainbow banner blanches Christian group

The Sylacauga, Ala., Business Association was hoping to spruce up the downtown and drum up business by flying banners during special events. Nothing controversial about that, but when it hoisted a rainbow-striped banner in honor of a weekend arts festival in late April, protesters lit up the switchboard at City Hall and complained that it was the same flag as that waved by sexual minority groups.

Business association member Carole Watson told the Birmingham *Post-Herald* that the flags were replaced with ones bearing a sunburst in order to appease the offended, adding that to her knowledge most people were unaware that the rainbow was also a symbol of sexual minority pride.

According to the *Post-Herald*, Kevin White, pastor of Sylacauga's Church on the Rock and self-professed expert on occult and other symbols, said city officials didn't take his word at first and refused to remove the flags. But when confronted by information he had downloaded from the Internet, including a color picture of the queer pride flag, they acquiesced. White, whose interdenominational church welcomes homosexual visitors who want to change their lifestyle, said he is satisfied with this resolution but remains suspicious of whomever wanted such a message displayed in the first place.

Parks and Recreation Director David Price said he finds it sad that a simple band of colors could stir up so much animosity. "God put the rainbow in the sky to symbolize a promise," he said. "That's what I think of when I see one. It's ironic that the first thing a Christian group thought of was gay pride."

Onward, queer Christian soldiers

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches' biennial congress in Sydney, Australia, to be held July 20 through 25, will be the largest international gay and lesbian religious gathering ever held in the Pacific Rim, said the Rev. Troy D. Perry, UFMCC founder and moderator, in a press statement. The organization's 18th General Conference will feature a rally; keynote speeches by internationally recognized human rights activists and theologians; business and planning sessions; and workshops on such topics as lesbian and gay parenting, AIDS ministries and the use of technology on behalf of queer spirituality.

Founded in 1968, UFMCC is the largest and oldest faith community with a primary ministry to sexual minorities. It comprises more than 300 congregations in 19 countries.

Information about the conference is available at UFMCC's Web site, <http://www.ufmcc.com>, by e-mailing UFMCCHQ@aol.com, by calling (310) 360-8640, or by writing 8704 Santa Monica Blvd., Second Floor, West Hollywood, CA 90069.

San Jose Asian community debuts drag pageant

In April, San Jose's first gay coffeehouse, Cafe Asia, crowned the city's first "Miss Gay Asian" at a female impersonation pageant touted as a coming out celebration for the local Vietnamese gay community, according to a story in the *San Jose Mercury News*. Organizers said they consider the event, which drew about 100 people, mostly Southeast Asian gay men, a sign that



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