

The decision overturns a 1996 ruling by Henrico County Circuit Judge Buford Parsons, which stipulated that Bottoms could only visit with her son, Tyler Doustou, in her own home and only when her cohabiting partner, April Wade, was not present. Parsons also barred any contact—even by telephone—between Wade and Bottoms' son.

The appeals panel, however, ruled Parsons had misapplied a decade-old precedent denying a gay father's domestic partner visitation with his child, and ordered the judge to reconsider the case.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which is providing legal representation for Bottoms, says the decision is the first by a higher court in Virginia to explicitly rule that a person's sexual orientation alone is insufficient grounds to restrict or deny visitation.

The case attracted nationwide attention in 1993 when Bottoms' mother successfully sued for custody of Doustou. In August 1996, Bottoms gave up her fight to win back custody in order to focus on securing greater visitation.

According to a press statement from the ACLU, the vast majority of U.S. states no longer deny visitation or custody based on a parent's sexual orientation, a trend which has been fueled by the growing body of research showing that a parent's sexuality has no effect on the child's well-being.

Three big companies board benefits bandwagon

The *Wall Street Journal* reports that J.P. Morgan & Co. will be the first major financial services firm to offer medical and dental benefits to same-sex domestic partners of its U.S. employees. The *Journal* reports that other Wall Street firms considering introducing benefits for same-gender couples include Merrill Lynch & Co., Morgan Stanley, Dean Witter, Discover & Co. and Goldman, Sachs & Co.

Herbert J. Hefke, head of human resources at J.P. Morgan, told the newspaper the company expects a small number of employees to take advantage of the new benefits when they are made available in December, resulting in "minimal cost implications."

Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that two San Francisco-based banks, Wells Fargo Bank and Union Bank, will offer health and dental benefits to same-sex and unmarried heterosexual partners beginning in January, though neither will go as far as Bank of America, which in March



extended benefits to adult siblings, parents and grandparents as well as domestic partners and their children.

All three banks acted in response to a San Francisco ordinance which denies city contracts to companies that do not provide equal benefits for gay and straight employees.

Bank of America, Wells Fargo and Union Bank are California's first-, second- and third-largest banks respectively, with branches in many other western states.

Episcopalians apologize, reach out to queers

At the end of its General Conference held in July in Philadelphia, the Episcopal Church officially apologized to gay men and lesbians for

"years of rejection and maltreatment by the church," reports the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The resolution, issued at the 2.5 million-member denomination's 72nd annual meeting, read in part: "We look forward to these words of apology being translated into deeds of tolerance and inclusion." The apology passed overwhelmingly in both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies.

The denomination also voted to study the possibility of blessing same-sex unions, agreed to extend insurance benefits to domestic partners, defeated attempts to prohibit ordination of sexually active gay clergy, and elected a presiding bishop, Frank T. Griswold 3d, 59, who is sympathetic to gay and lesbian issues.

Conservative elements within the church are unhappy with the apology and other resolutions. On the same day the apology was read to the assembled church representatives, Bishop James Stanton of Dallas, Texas, read an opposition statement affirming traditional stands on sexuality and the ordination of women. Stanton expressed solidarity with others who are pained by "sexual practices clearly at odds with the whole of the biblical pattern."

E-world civil rights in danger, activists warn

An article in the July 30 issue of *Communications Daily* reveals a planned meeting between America Online Chairman Steve Case and right-



wing, pro-censorship organizations, according to an ACT UP-Washington media advisory.

The Christian Coalition, Enough is Enough and the Partnership for a Drug Free America are among the groups invited to the October meeting with the country's largest Internet service provider. Case called the confab in reported hopes of reaching an agreement on "content issues."

Angered by Case's failure to invite progressive civil rights and gay and lesbian rights organizations, ACT UP's Steve Michael says, "We call on Steve Case to stand up for the First Amendment. Hundreds of thousands of gay men, lesbians and people with AIDS are currently AOL members. To marginalize an entire community by cutting deals with our sworn enemies is unacceptable."

ACT UP Washington and other D.C.-based groups are organizing around the planned meeting and are calling on AOL members to voice their opinions on the matter to Case (SteveCase@aol.com).

Meanwhile NewsPlanet reports that CompuServe, which is the second-largest ISP in the United States and has 5.4 million users worldwide, announced that, as of Aug. 5, gay and lesbian content has been moved to its adults-only area, where users must prove their status and use a special password—this despite the fact that CompuServe offers screening options for parents who want to control their kids' surfing.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation is holding an ongoing dialogue with producers of filtering software about the ethics of treating everything gay as a suitable target for restriction.

Compiled by Christopher D. Cuttone

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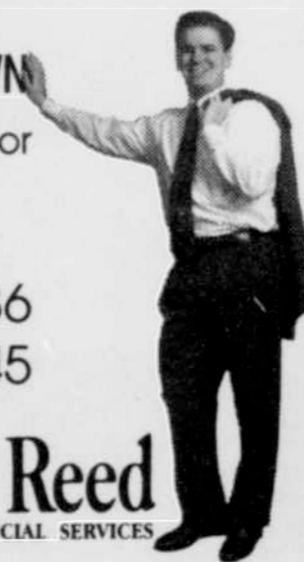
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