

# PRESS CLUB PARITY

**Gay publisher prompts National Press Club to extend membership benefits to domestic partners** by Gip Plaster

The National Press Club, a 90-year-old Washington, D.C.-based journalists institution, has voted to give domestic partners of unmarried members—gay, lesbian and straight—access to the same benefits available to spouses of married members.

"When I went to check out the facilities of the National Press Club and asked about benefits for my significant other, it didn't occur to me that I was going to be changing such an important and historic institution—and making it face an issue that I believe most companies have already faced," says Chad Johnson, an associate at the law firm of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and an owner of Window Media, which publishes the Atlanta gay and lesbian newspaper *Southern Voice*, among others. "But I'm glad that was the result," he adds.

When Johnson, 31, and the other members of the city's Harvard Club were invited to become full members of the NPC, he decided he would consider joining. The organization's building, complete with work-out facilities, library, bar and two restaurants, is only a block from Johnson's workplace.

the board was "out of touch with modern trends," or "no member had asked the question."

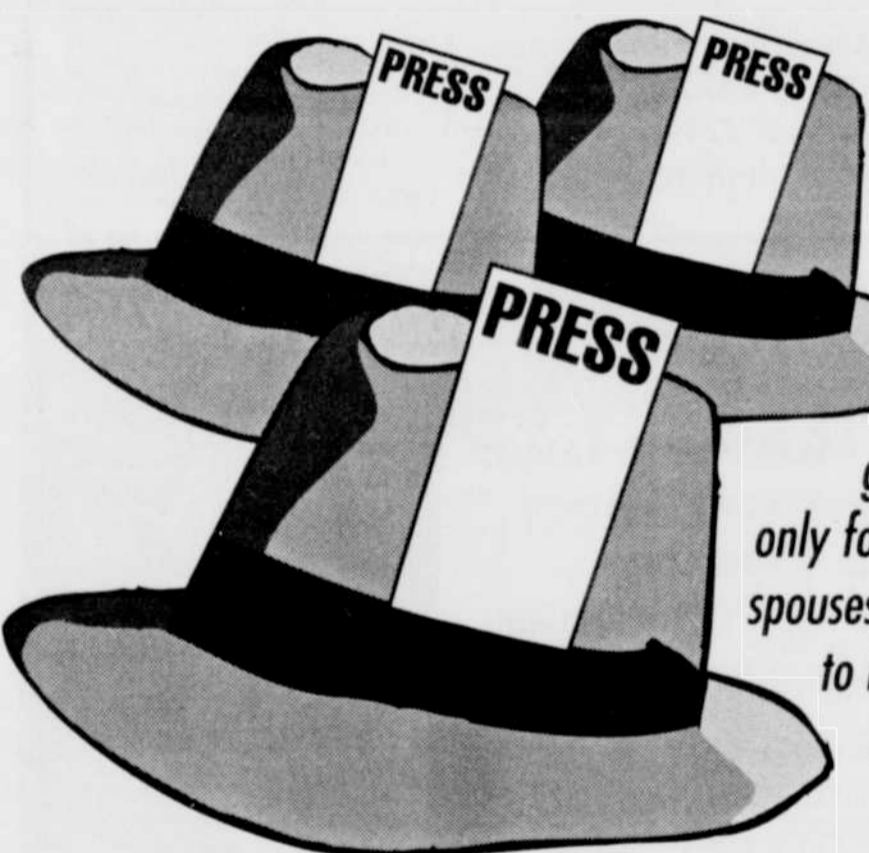
The answer is the latter, according to Larry Lipman, the NPC's recently elected president.

"Someone asked if they could get a spouse card for their partner. We checked with the city and they apparently don't have a policy on spousal benefits one way or the other," says Lipman, who was present at the board of governors meeting where the issue was discussed.

The board reviewed available materials on the topic, including some created by the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay and lesbian group.

"We felt there was no reason why a legitimate domestic partner shouldn't get the same benefits as a married spouse," Lipman says. "We weren't looking at the word *spouse* in a legalistic definition but rather in a practical definition."

The only concern was that members, either gay or straight, would obtain cards for short-term boyfriends or girlfriends rather than only for long-term spouses, so the board agreed to limit the benefit to one spousal card per year. No proof of domestic partnership is required for members to get the card for their "spouse."



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"I saw in the literature that spouses could enjoy all the access to benefits for an extra \$55 a year," Johnson explains, adding he thought it would be nice to be able to work out with his partner Craig Benson, 25, a second-year law school student at Georgetown University.

While visiting the facility, Johnson asked if his partner could get the spousal membership benefits. He was told that the club had no policy on domestic partners.

"I was very surprised that the National Press Club didn't have a policy on domestic partners given that the media is often portrayed as being liberal or avant-garde—even radical," Johnson says. "I told them that I didn't want to join unless Craig would be able to qualify, as he should, and as he does at my law firm and under the ordinances of the District of Columbia."

The membership office agreed to propose to the board of governors that domestic partners of members be allowed spousal benefits.

Johnson says, "I found the press club's membership office to be sensitive and responsive to my inquiry."

He says he believes there are only two reasons why a policy did not already exist: either

Members of the NPC have not been informed of the policy shift. Johnson says he thinks it should be mentioned in the club's newsletter.

Lipman indicates that if members ask, they will be informed of the policy. When asked if the club has members who could benefit from the spouse card but may not know to ask about it, he responded: "I just hadn't thought of that. That may be something that we'll do."

The club, which has fewer than 50 full-time employees, does not offer domestic partner health benefits to its employees. Lipman says the board discussed the matter but took no action because no employees have requested the benefits.

The NPC was formed in 1908. Most U.S. presidents have spoken from NPC's podium, and it was at the club that both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan announced their candidacies for the U.S. presidency.

The NPC did not allow African American reporters until 1955, and women were excluded until 1971. The organization had its first female president in 1982.

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