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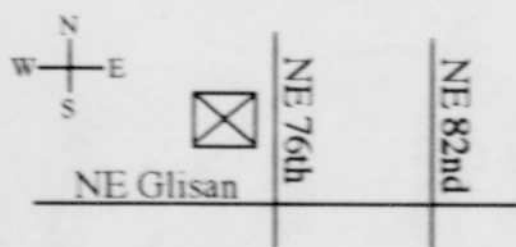
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NATIONAL news

ALABAMA

Two men accused in the February murder of a gay man from Sylacauga now face the possibility of the death penalty.

In March, a grand jury upgraded the charges against Steven Eric Mullins and Charles Butler Jr. to capital murder in the death of Billy Jack Gaither.

Butler and Mullins allegedly lured 39-year-old Gaither away from his home, beat him to death with an ax handle on a dirt road, then threw his body atop a burning pyre of old tires. His charred remains were discovered by a passer-by.

According to police, both Butler, 21, and Mullins, 25, confessed to killing Gaither because, they claim, he made a sexual advance toward them.

Sex toys are once again legal—at least temporarily—in Alabama. In March, U. S. District Court Judge Lynnwood Smith of Huntsville overturned the state's ban on sex toys, saying the state had no reason to prohibit the sale of the items.

In his opinion, Smith found the state's 1998 law to be "overly broad" and in violation of due-process rights because it bears no "rational relation to a legitimate state interest," reports The Associated Press.

The statute forbids selling or distributing "any obscene material or any device designed or marketed as useful primarily for the stimulation of human genital organs." Violation of the statute is a misdemeanor that carries a possible sentence of one year in jail and a \$10,000 fine.

Sherri Williams, who sells sex toys at stores in Huntsville and Decatur, and five other women who either sell the devices or said vibrators are necessary for their sexual gratification, challenged the law. They were pleased with Smith's ruling.

Emphasizing that people who use the devices would be "denied therapy for, among other things, sexual dysfunction," Smith also wrote that "a majority, or at least a significant minority, of the proscribed devices, as a matter of law, are not obscene under any established definition of obscenity."

Smith did not support the plaintiffs' argument that the ban violated privacy rights by indirectly prohibiting adults from engaging in legal acts in their own bedrooms.

The state attorney general's office is considering whether to appeal the ruling.

CALIFORNIA

For \$20, domestic partners in Los Angeles County can now register their partnership with the local government.

According to a March 24 *Los Angeles Times* story, the Board of Supervisors created the formal registry to provide a centralized list for businesses that extend benefits to unmarried couples.

In addition to the \$20 fee, those registering must sign a form stating that at least one member of the couple lives in or works for Los Angeles County, that both partners are older than 18, and that they consider themselves to be domestic partners.

They can also check off boxes stating that they live together or share property. The definition of domestic partners was intentionally left a bit vague so that individual businesses could have some latitude in defining what they consider to be a domestic partnership.

Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg, who spoke in support of the registry to the Board of Supervisors, said: "More and more private employers have said to me they would be willing to do it if they didn't have to



CLINTON PRESSES FOR HATE CRIMES LAW

President Bill Clinton reiterated his support for federal hate crimes legislation at a White House event on April 6. He also asked the federal departments of Justice and Education to begin collecting data on hate crimes in schools.

Clinton announced "a public-private partnership" to discuss tolerance in middle schools. The program, called *Dealing with Our Differences*, will run in October.

Among the project's participants are AT&T, Court TV and Cable in the Classrooms, along with federal agencies.

Gay and lesbian organizations are aware of the project but have yet to be involved in shaping its contents.

In a statement, Clinton linked ethnic cleansing in Kosovo with hatred in the United States.

"America will not be able to be a force for good abroad unless we are good at home," he said.

Clinton drew upon his own experience growing up in the South when he said: "It is very easy to get into a social system where you always get to think a little better of yourself because you've always got someone that you can dehumanize. And that's really what this whole issue with gays is today in America."

It was the only time he used the word gay

in a statement of more than 2,000 words.

The meeting came a day after the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reported a 108 percent increase in anti-gay violence in 1998 over the previous year. According to the coalition, the incidents are not only growing in number, they are also becoming increasingly severe.

"The president has always understood the importance of sending the message that a hate crime committed against one American is a crime against all Americans and is an assault on our society's core values," says Winnie Stachelberg, political director of the Human Rights Campaign, who then called on Congress to pass the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1999.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, has scheduled a hearing on the bill before the committee on April 28. He held a similar hearing last July.

The anti-gay Family Research Council, meanwhile, views Clinton's remarks as part of a conspiracy "to invade America's middle schools and colleges with the homosexual agenda under the guise of 'teaching tolerance,'" said FRC's senior director of cultural studies, Robert H. Knight.

■ Reported by BOB ROEHR