

NATIONAL news

to death his live-in lover John Stagno in their Crown Heights apartment. The deadly fight came after Pickett told Stagno he was leaving rather than taking any more abuse. Aidala stated that Stagno charged at Pickett with either a bottle or a knife, and that Pickett stabbed Stagno in the chest in self-defense.

The fight and subsequent death were the result of a 10-month abusive relationship that saw Stagno take over every aspect of Pickett's life, Aidala said.

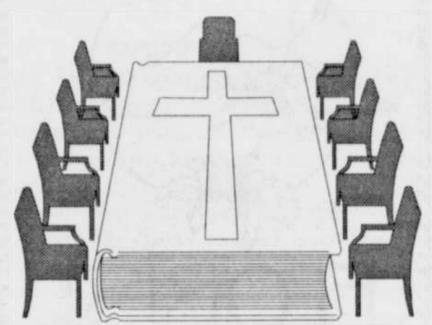
TEXAS

As part of a custody ruling in a divorce case, a lesbian mother in Wichita Falls was told by a judge that the local Metropolitan Community Church is not an acceptable church for her and her daughter to attend.

The mother is fighting the ruling with the backing of Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and the National Center for Lesbian Rights. According to a May 6 UFMCC press release, a notice of intent to appeal has been filed in the Texas court system.

The conflict stems from a legal opinion written by Judge Keith Nelson of the 78th Judicial District. Nelson wrote: "The primary issue is where the child would attend Sunday school and church.... The intent was for mainline churches to be utilized in the religious training of the daughter.... The Metropolitan Community Church does not fall within this category."

Said the Rev. Troy D. Perry, moderator of the more than 300 MCC congregations: "First, the government has no legal right telling any family which churches are acceptable and which are not. Moreover, the U.S. Constitution, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches compiled and published by the National Council of Churches all recognize Metropolitan Community Church as a church."



The mother said she tried to comply with the judge's ruling.

"We never felt comfortable in those places. My heart almost broke when my daughter begged me to take her back to the MCC church," she added.

■ Compiled by KRISTINE CHATWOOD

BANNER BAN

Linda Robertson wants to show the citizens of Myrtle Beach, S.C., her true colors, but the city says the rainbow flag flying outside her restaurant and bar violates a recently changed city ordinance.

Robertson was cited in April for flying a rainbow flag in an area where many flags, banners and "wind-activated devices" are prohibited. U.S. flags; flags of other nations; state, city and county flags; church flags; and registered corporate flags are allowed, however.

The rainbow flag has flown since Rainbow House Bistro, which caters to a mostly lesbian and gay clientele, opened in March 1998.

In September, a city ordinance was changed. Now, in the zoning area where Robertson's business is located, only amusement parks with more than five acres of property are allowed to display flags and banners.

Robertson says she is about two blocks away from an amusement park that displays more banners than she can count.

Rainbow flags, first flown in 1978 and now recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers, are an important part of gay and lesbian history, Robertson says.

"It speaks just like the American flag or a state or international flag," she explains. "Yes, I own a business, but this is not a business issue. This is a personal issue."

Robertson recently appeared before the City Council to ask for a change in the ordinance. She told councilors she believes the measure is an unconstitutional restriction of her First Amendment right to free speech.

"Since the beginning of time, groups have identified themselves by the colors and marks of their flags," she told council members.

"These flags have been the people's voice, announcing presence, pride, love for families and neighbors, and the history of their heritage and culture. The rainbow flag is no different."

The council took no action.

City spokesperson Mark Kruea, meanwhile, defends the measure, arguing Myrtle Beach is a tourism-driven community that restricts signage, flags and banners in order to keep the community from looking cluttered. He says the city does not find the meaning of the rainbow flag objectionable.

If Robertson works with city code enforcement officials, he suggests, she might be able to find an acceptable way to show her pride.

"In all likelihood she could find some other way she could make the same statement," Kruea says.

Two other gay-owned establishments in the city were also notified in writing that they are in violation of the city's ordinance, according to a report in *The Sun News*, a Myrtle Beach newspaper.

Similar incidents have happened elsewhere. Several years ago, an Arlington, Texas, pet store owner was cited for flying a rainbow flag, even though a nearby car dealer flew a number of flags and banners. The flag no longer flies, but rainbow patterns wrap poles outside the store and the rainbow colors are more visible than ever.

But Robertson still flies her flag. She could be sentenced to 30 days in jail and fined \$500 for every day she violates the ordinance. She says she believes there will be a huge outcry in the community if officials try to take action against her.

Yet she adds: "I guess if they come to get me, I have no choice."

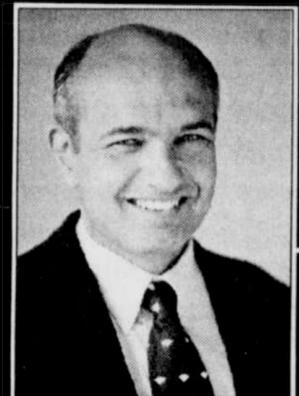
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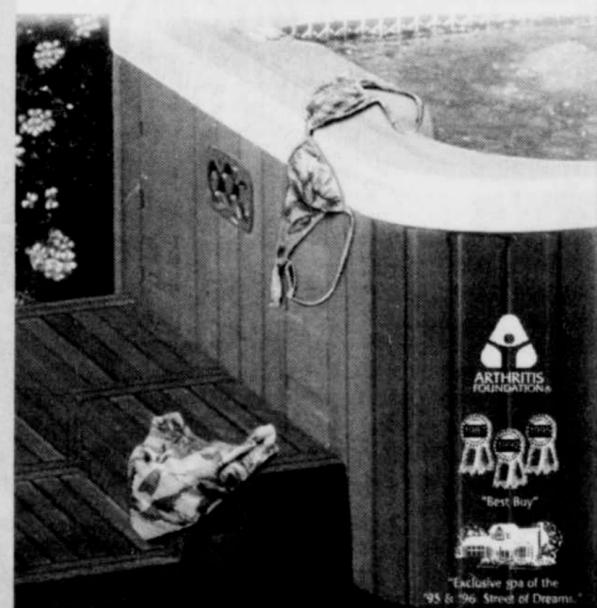
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