

During the past few years, defense-of-marriage mania has swept the country. But in Congress, amid the occasional screech about the "sanctity" of heterosexual marriage, a pragmatic bit of legislation has quietly been assigned to committee.

U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat, has introduced a measure known as the Permanent Partners Immigration Act of 2000.

The bill, HR3650, seeks to extend to committed same-sex couples the immigration rights heterosexuals often enjoy.

Current immigration law is based on the principle of family reunification, but gay and lesbian families are not acknowledged.

A heterosexual U.S. citizen who falls in love while working or studying abroad, for example, has the option of getting married. The Immigration and Naturalization Service may not always make the process easy, but U.S. citizens can sponsor their noncitizen legal spouses for immigration purposes. Once the paperwork is done and the foreign spouse is settled, the couple can go about life without fears of deportation.

Gay and lesbian couples in the same situation face an unending barrage of complex visa applications, staggering legal fees and extended separations. And visas are finite; each one buys only a year or two of security after an application process that can take months.

Nadler's bill seeks to remedy the situation by adding "permanent partners" to portions of the Immigration and Nationality Act that refer to spouses.

The bill defines a permanent partnership as a "committed relationship...in which both parties intend a lifelong commitment." The partners must be 18 years of age, financially interdependent, not married to or partnered with anyone else, legally unable to marry each other, and not "first, second or third degree blood relation(s)."

Two Oregon Democrats, Reps. David Wu and Peter Defazio, have signed on as co-sponsors. (Wu is himself an immigrant from Taiwan.)

At press time, the bill had nearly two dozen co-sponsors. Another Oregon Democrat, Rep. Earl Blumenauer, is actively considering the bill.

The Portland chapter of the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force has launched a letter-writing and petition campaign in support of the bill. Members are also attempting to schedule meetings with Oregon's congressional delegation.

The Portland group started last August, joining LGIRTF chapters in seven other U.S. cities. Meetings usually draw eight to 10 people, but about 50 supporters subscribe to the local e-mail list.

Most of the members are binational couples in the Portland metropolitan area, though the

PHOTO BY BOB ROEHRE



U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., at a March 1 Capitol Hill news conference

LET'S MAKE IT PERMANENT

Congressional committee is considering a measure that could make life a little easier for gay and lesbian binational couples by Irene K. Hislop

"Across the globe, and now here at home, political leaders are recognizing that gay and lesbian couples should not be torn apart by unfair immigration laws."

—Lavi Soloway, Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force national board chair

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—Maura Roche, Basic Rights Oregon

group is conducting outreach to other parts of the state and welcomes anyone interested in the issue.

Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide queer political organization, and the Lesbian Community Project have also generated publicity about HR3650.

Maura Roche, BRO's government relations consultant, calls the bill "a good and needed step."

She adds: "Recent polling has indicated that Americans and Oregonians are very supportive of changes in the law that ensure everyone's basic rights, especially in employment and housing. I think [immigration rights] would be received similarly."

That's encouraging news for binational couples such as Leslie and An, who asked that their real names not be used, given the legal tightrope they are walking to maintain An's visa status.

"It controls my life," An says of her restrictive visa and the couple's efforts to renew it. "We don't have time to do anything else. You feel guilty if you don't work on it every day."

The duo know another binational couple who have spent \$50,000 on various legal fees and travel expenses in their efforts to stay together.

The expense involved is often made worse by restrictions on the foreign partner's right to work and earn an income.

"It eats at your self-esteem," An says. "When I went home recently, I felt so good because I was normal. I had rights."

"They should allow you the right to be a family without going through hell," says Leslie, who adds that legalizing same-sex marriages would be far easier and less expensive for couples and for the government than creating a patchwork of domestic partnership laws.

Leslie says she is not optimistic about the Nadler bill's chance of becoming law, but she feels its introduction represents progress.

"The gauntlet has been thrown," she says. "There's no way you can ignore this for much longer."

Indeed. The issue has reached as far as the White House. At a fund-raiser last fall, President Bill Clinton expressed support for chang-

ing the law to allow U.S. citizens to sponsor same-sex partners for immigration.

"Across the globe, and now here at home, political leaders are recognizing that gay and lesbian couples should not be torn apart by unfair immigration laws," says Lavi Soloway, LGIRTF national board chair.

Thirteen other countries—including Australia, Canada, France, South Africa and the United Kingdom—currently recognize same-sex relationships for immigration purposes.

The Permanent Partners Immigration Act of 2000 has been assigned to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims. Openly gay Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank is a member of the committee, as is conservative Rep. Charles Canady, R-Fla., who sponsored the Religious Liberty Protection Act last July.

■ The LESBIAN AND GAY IMMIGRATION RIGHTS TASK FORCE Portland chapter can be reached at (503) 471-1568 or lgirtfpx@aol.com.

Performance artist TIM MILLER will bring his show *Glory Box* to Portland on April 29. The piece is about the immigration struggles of Miller's Australian partner. The performance will take place at Echo Theatre, 1515 S.E. 37th Ave., and some proceeds will benefit the Portland chapter of LGIRTF. For more information, call (503) 203-3305.

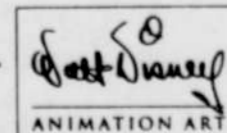
IRENE HISLOP is a free-lance writer based in Portland.



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