

## NATIONAL news

### IOWA

Dan Savage, sex columnist for the Seattle newspaper *The Stranger*, appeared in May in Polk County District Court to plead not guilty to a charge of felony voter fraud, reports the May 10 *Des Moines Register*.

The charges stem from an article Savage wrote for the online magazine *Salon*. In the article, titled "Stalking Gary Bauer," Savage detailed his efforts to infiltrate the campaign of the right-wing Republican. In particular, Savage wrote that he used his temporary address at the Kirkwood Hotel in Des Moines to vote in Iowa's January Republican presidential caucus. Savage labeled his voting an act of protest.

This case is based on some very narrow election laws, according to Des Moines attorney Mark Weinhardt, who adds that it is not related to Savage's claims of licking doorknobs and office supplies in an effort to infect Bauer with the flu.

Savage's trial has been set for July 24. He is currently free on the district's pretrial release program and has returned to Seattle.

### KANSAS

The Topeka City Council has gone on record as officially opposing hate. The council did so with the unanimous passage in May of a resolution stating its opposition to "hateful behavior," according to a May 10 story in *The Topeka Capital-Journal*.

Topeka-based Westboro Baptist Church, headquarters of infamous homophobe the Rev. Fred W. Phelps Sr., threatened to challenge the resolution in court.

The resolution makes no reference to the Westboro Baptist Church or to its congregation of ardent anti-gay picketers.

Margie Phelps, daughter of the Rev. Phelps and a member of the Phelps law firm, insisted it is obvious the resolution is aimed at her group. She sent an e-mail to city council members in which she wrote that the resolution would "communicate a message of disparagement against our religion."

"The next time we meet," she said, "it will be in a courtroom."

A similar resolution was introduced last November by Councilman Clark Duffy. That resolution vanished after being sent to committee.

This latest version was also introduced by Duffy. In April, with the backing of a local group called Concerned Citizens for Topeka, Duffy introduced the new version, saying he and members of CCT felt "the frustration of a simple resolution like that sitting in committee."

On the night of the vote, CCT organized a rally on the steps of the Statehouse. The rally was followed by a march to City Hall to show support for the resolution.

Members of Westboro Baptist Church appeared at the rally bearing anti-gay picket signs. Security officers kept the group several hundred feet away from the rally.

The anti-hate resolution was quickly moved to the top of the council meeting's agenda when the room filled to overflowing.

Although the resolution was not aimed directly at Westboro Baptist Church, several

speakers made it clear that the actions of church members were a source of great concern. Some gay citizens spoke of having been targeted by the Westboro Baptist Church in faxes and pickets.

Betty Simecka, former president and CEO of the Topeka Convention and Visitors Bureau, told of people choosing not to hold their conventions in Topeka because of the pickets.

### NATIONAL



Tommy Lee Watkins Jr. was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. He was president of his class and aspired to be a Navy pilot.

That life fell apart in 1997, when another midshipman accused Watkins of making sexual advances toward him and other midshipmen. Although a legal officer reviewed the case and found there was not enough evidence to support many of the allegations, Watkins resigned from the academy out of fear that he would not be able to receive a fair trial because of homophobia.

Now, *The Associated Press* reports, the Navy wants Watkins to reimburse the government nearly \$67,000.

The order to repay, issued in March by Carolyn H. Becraft, assistant secretary of the Navy for manpower, appears to violate Pentagon policy, according to a report issued in November by the Navy's highest personnel review panel and recently made public by *The Washington Post*.

The panel's conclusion is based on a 1994 policy which states that people discharged for being gay should be required to repay the government only under certain circumstances that involve a specific, written finding of homosexual conduct.

"There was no finding of any aggravated homosexual behavior," the Board for Correction of Naval Records said in its report. "Accordingly, the board believes that directing recoupment was inappropriate in Watkins' case."

The report was given to *The Associated Press* by William Ferris, Watkins' attorney.

Ferris plans to file suit in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, asking that the Navy be ordered to follow the board's recommendations.

Becraft argues the policy does not apply, because Watkins left the academy voluntarily by resigning rather than facing charges. Ferris counters that it is ridiculous for the Navy to tell Watkins to resign or be kicked out and then bill him for the cost of his education because he agreed to leave voluntarily.

It is the military's practice to require reimbursement, either in cash or through enlisted service, from officer trainees who leave the academy in their junior or senior years. This rule is particularly burdensome for gay men and lesbians, who cannot serve enlisted time because of the military's gay ban.

■ Compiled by KRISTINE CHATWOOD, a Portland-based free-lance writer and longtime Just Out contributor.



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