

MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (AGAIN)

Senator gets the ball rolling on hate crimes legislation by Jim Radosta

U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., expressed confidence Feb. 11 that his latest attempt to enact federal hate crimes legislation will succeed. He made the announcement during the dinner that kicked off the 2001 Oregon Hate Crimes Conference at the Eugene Hilton.

Smith said he and U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., are ready to send out a "dear colleagues" letter seeking co-sponsors for the legislation, which failed to make it out of the House during the last session of Congress. Their amendment would add sexual orientation to existing hate crimes laws.

"I believe it will pass the Senate...by an overwhelming bipartisan majority—a veto-proof majority," Smith said during an interview with *Just Out*. "I believe that had our bill last year been brought up in the House it would have passed there as well, quite comfortably."

Smith said he couldn't speak for President Bush, whose stance on a federal statute is unclear, but called this a wonderful opportunity for the administration to reach out to the gay and lesbian community. "I'm going to pressure him all I can."

Smith said hate crimes legislation gives the federal government the power to enforce civil rights laws in those states that are reluctant to do so. He said this sends a message that can change hearts and minds.

"People can debate its effectiveness, but I like its value both symbolically and substantively," Smith said. "I believe the federal government ought to have the ability to come to the aid of any group or category of citizens that is the potential object of hate crimes."

Smith said he is trying to open people's eyes on Capitol Hill about the Local Law Enforcement Act. He has faced fierce opposition from within his own party on the issue.

"I believe some of those who voted against the bill last year will vote for it in the coming year as a result of the work I'm doing," Smith said. "Republicans are just as capable of growing as Democrats when it comes to how we stand up and protect our citizens against hate crimes."

Keynote speaker Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was murdered in 1998 because of his sexual orientation, was not so optimistic. "All respect to Sen. Smith, I think it's going to be a little longer before we move forward."

Shepard joined him for a press conference prior to the dinner. She thanked Smith for his efforts to push hate crimes legislation.

"I'm really disappointed that it didn't go through last year," Shepard said. "I was a little concerned considering the change of leadership in the White House, but...you just have to stay hopeful."

The audience was in tears during Shepard's speech, which included the statement

she read to her son's killers during their trial. She encouraged people to do their part in fighting ignorance and fear by simply coming out at work.

"I know it's a big step, and I know it's a risk," Shepard said. "But it's a risk that has to be taken, because hate is everywhere."



U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., promises Judy Shepard he'll fight for hate crimes legislation

Shepard also asked audience members to let others know that hateful language is unacceptable. "When you don't speak up, you're implicitly giving permission to those individuals to advance to the next step of hate, which is violence."


More than 600 law enforcement officers, educators and activists attended the three-day conference, "Eliminating Bias Crimes: Healing Our Communities." A total of 34 workshops were held on subjects including "Far Right Groups in the Northwest," "Organizing the Faith Community" and "Hate on the Internet."

One of the hot topics of conversation during the dinner was a draft copy of a bill by state Sen. Gary George, R-Newberg, circulated Feb. 9 that would add oppressed corporations to the list of hate-affected populations. Former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts demanded lawmakers immediately reject the "cynical" proposal.

"This bill and its sponsor, who I believe is a very uncaring legislator, should be forced to look in the faces of Judy and Dennis Shepard," she said. "How dare he show such disrespect to the real victims of hatred and violence, and I want you to tell him so."

The hotel also was filled with teens attending the Youth Conference on Hate Crimes, which was restricted to those 19 and younger. Organizers were pleased with the turnout.

Among the workshops offered was "Hate and the Extreme Music Scene," a topical subject considering controversial rapper Eminem is expected to win several Grammy Awards on Feb. 21. Shepard, whose son was the focus of a recent unauthorized MTV biopic, took the network to task for sending mixed messages.

"I find it really disturbing that that's the message that's getting to our young people," she said. "MTV's just sort of gone into outer space, and I think it's really unfortunate." 

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