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NATIONAL news

MICHIGAN

When the Rev. Fred Phelps came to Ann Arbor last month, the gay community decided not to get mad. They decided to get rich.

Among the locales the Kansas-based Phelps and his followers elected to picket Feb. 17 was the gay-owned \aut\ BAR. With only two days' notice, co-owners Keith Orr and Martin Contreras organized a unique fund-raising scheme in lieu of a counterprotest.

They sent out an e-mail message asking customers and friends to pledge money to the Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project for every minute Phelps picketed the bar. This way, the longer he stayed to spew hate, the more money he would raise for the gay advocacy group and community center.

Pledges immediately began to pour in from as far away as New Hampshire, Texas and California. By the day of the demonstration, supporters had promised to contribute a total of \$107 for every minute Phelps picketed the bar.

"Normally, a fund-raising event of this magnitude takes months of planning and a lot of up-front costs," Orr said. "In 48 hours, we raised over \$6,000 without spending a dime. I was astonished."

On the day of the protest, Phelps' followers numbered only four adults and two small children. Meanwhile, more than 100 community members gathered in the bar, celebrating while the Westboro Baptist Church stood outside raising money for Ann Arbor's gay community.

"Phelps is free to spread his message, however perverse we find it, wherever he wants; the First Amendment protects his right to do that," Orr said. "But we turned what could have been a negative into a positive."

NATIONAL

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network have joined the emerging Fair Taxes for All coalition, which warns about the Bush administration's tax cut.

NGLTF officials cited government predictions that one in three families will not receive any tax cut whatsoever, while the most affluent 1 percent will receive an average windfall of \$45,000 a year or \$120 a day—about three times what a minimum-wage worker is paid for an eight-hour day. According to GLSEN, a broad tax cut might undermine adequately funded public schools—an essential part of providing a quality, discrimination-free education for all.

"By devoting the vast majority of the government surplus to a sweeping tax cut, the Bush administration's plan leaves few, if any, resources for investment in the education system," said Kevin Jennings, GLSEN executive director. "Studies have shown that Americans prioritize education over tax cuts."

The coalition, started by People for the American Way, brings together more than 500 organizations that are concerned about the implications of the Bush administration's tax plan. According to its mission statement, making a budget that's fair and responsible means balancing needs against resources and making sound choices.

"This proposal benefits the most affluent at



Keith Orr (right) and his partner, Martin Contreras, celebrate with their staff

the expense of the rest of us," said Elizabeth Toledo, NGLTF executive director. "While Bush has yet to address the real needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, he has prioritized plans to line the pockets of those who need it the least and to shift public funds to religious schools and churches."

CALIFORNIA

Assemblymember Paul Koretz introduced legislation Feb. 23 enabling gay and lesbian couples to enter into a civil union that would provide some of the rights, benefits, responsibilities and obligations afforded by the state to different-sex couples when they get married.



Paul Koretz

The California Family Protection Act of 2001 principally was drafted by the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, working in consultation with numerous attorneys and civil rights organizations. Lawmakers who have signed on as co-authors include Assemblymembers Dion Aroner, Wilma Chan, Marco Firebaugh, Jackie Goldberg, Christine Kehoe, John Longville, Carole Migden, Virginia Strom-Martin, Herb Wesson and Sen. Sheila Kuehl.

"This bill is about California's interest in encouraging close and caring families and promoting stable and lasting family relationships," said Jean Harris,

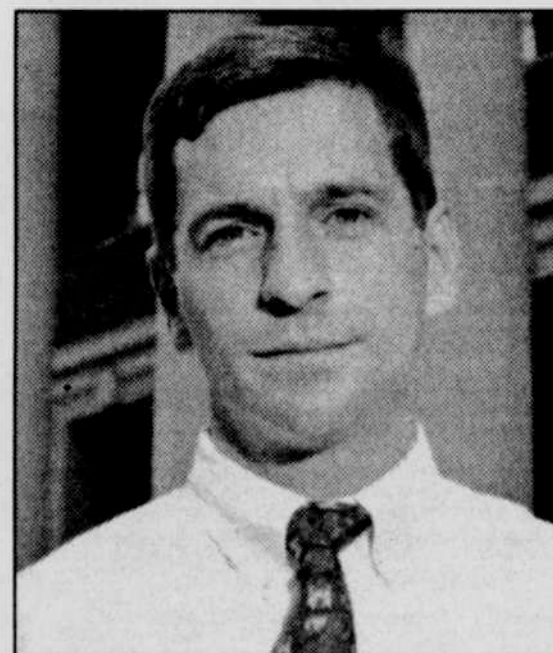
California Alliance for Pride and Equality executive director. "It will give gay and lesbian couples and the children we are raising protection from the economic and social consequences of major life crises as well as protect the state and third parties from numerous harms and costs."

The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California issued a statement of strong support for the legislation.

Board member Silvia Argueta said a majority of all California voters—52 percent—support legal unions for same-sex couples.

"AB 1338 would move California much closer to the ACLU's ideal of complete equality for gay and lesbian couples: equal marriage rights," she said. "The bill would not completely realize that goal, since it would not grant gay and lesbian couples the rights and responsibilities derived from federal laws or recognition of their legal union in other states."

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Kevin Jennings