

DADE JÀ VU

Miami ends political struggle that began 25 years ago

Compiled by Jim Radosta

Activists celebrated Sept. 10 the defeat of a ballot question that had attempted to repeal a 4-year-old provision of the Miami-Dade County Human Rights Ordinance prohibiting discrimination against gay men and lesbians. The win—53 percent to 47 percent—is being hailed as a turning point in 25 years of struggle against the right wing's vicious campaign of anti-gay ballot measures.

"We have made history with this campaign," said Lorri L. Jean, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director. "Tonight's victory signals the death knell of what has been the favored tactic of religious political extremists for the last decade—trying to foist their brand of bigotry on everyone through anti-gay ballot measures."

The amendment was placed on the ballot by the group Take Back Miami-Dade to delete sexual orientation from a nondiscrimination ordinance passed in 1998 by the county. The statute includes protections for gay men and lesbians in employment, housing, credit and accommodations.

This battle was important because Miami-Dade is the county where orange juice queen Anita Bryant helped repeal a similar ordinance in 1977 under the slogan "Save Our Children." Her mud-slinging campaign largely is credited for giving birth to the modern anti-gay movement.

Similar to Bryant's crusade, the opposition this time also resorted to dirty tricks. It distributed a flier in black churches that misled potential voters by saying, "Martin Luther King Jr. would be outraged if he knew homosexual extremists were abusing the civil rights movement to get special rights based on their sexual behavior."

Coretta Scott King repudiated the misinformation through a spokesman, saying that her late husband, who never publicly addressed the issue of homosexuality, told her he was concerned about the discrimination suffered by gay men and lesbians. Groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Urban League were in favor of retaining the ordinance banning discrimination, and other black community leaders renounced the right-wing smear tactics.

"It's an affront to every American and particularly African Americans to misappropriate the words and image of Dr. King to promote intolerance and discrimination," said U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek, D-Fla. "That is shameful, because Dr. King used his entire life to bring people together and to prevent the majority from discriminating against the minority."

Additionally, a key member of the campaign and several underlings were arrested and accused of voter fraud last month. Miami-Dade Christian Coalition chairman Anthony Verdugo was charged Aug. 16 with falsely swearing that he had witnessed someone sign a petition.

Notary public Ralph Patterson also was arrested for illegally notarizing his signature on a peti-



According to Lorri L. Jean (left, at April's Northwest GLBT Power Summit), the landmark victory proves NGLTF's campaign strategy works

tion. And a 17-year-old man was charged with falsely swearing to witness someone sign a petition.

Adding to the drama were widespread voting irregularities and reports of illegalities that effectively disenfranchised swaths of Miami Beach and other queer voting strongholds in the county. NGLTF called on Gov. Jeb Bush and the U.S. Justice Department to investigate the failures of the state's election system "so that the GLBT community and indeed all Floridians will never again be denied the opportunity to vote and have those votes counted," Jean said.

Rampant breakdowns in new touch-screen voting machines, failure to open polling places in a timely manner, untrained personnel and refusal by election officials to provide paper "provisional" ballots when voting machines malfunctioned left voters and observers alike stunned and angered. Numerous complaints were registered by people who went to the polls to vote "no" on the ballot measure but were prevented from doing so.

In some precincts, there was no ability to vote on any initiatives. In others, voters complained that when they voted "no" on the anti-gay ballot measure, "yes" votes appear to have registered instead. Many polling places were not operative until after 1 p.m., more than five hours later than scheduled.

"It's a shame that so many of the votes of our supporters were not counted," said Georg Ketelhohn, No to Discrimination/Save Dade co-chairman. "Had the election gone properly, our margin of victory would have been even greater."

While problems were reported in precincts countywide, Miami's Jewish and gay voters were disproportionately hit by machine malfunction and other irregularities. These communities represented some of the strongest opposition to the measure.

"In 2000, African Americans in southern Florida were denied the right to vote and to have their votes counted. In 2002, the gay and Jewish communities are facing the same inexcusable fate," Jean said. "How many times must historically oppressed communities be denied the right to participate in elections under the watch of Jeb and George W. Bush?"

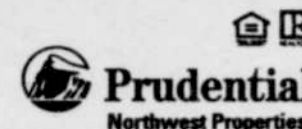
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