Court Treats Same-Sex Breakup as Divorce

A Yakima (Wash.) County Superior Court judge has ruled that two women ending a 10-year relationship must divide their assets equally, a decision that amounts to a divorce in a state that does not recognize same-sex marriage.

Judge Heather Van Nuys said the relationship between Yakima physician Julia Robertson and Seattle nurse Linda Gormley was "sufficiently marriagelike to provide equitable relief." Gormley considered the ruling a personal victory and a major accomplishment for same-sex couples everywhere.

"Before, we had minimal legal protections," said Gormley, who sued Robertson after the couple ended their relationship in 1998. "Hopefully, now that changes."

Van Nuys, who issued the written ruling Nov. 1, called the couple's relationship an "intimate domestic partnership," allowing both women the same property rights given to a husband and wife in a divorce. While the women never entered into a marriage contract, "they did engage in activities directly affecting their careers, assets and debts, including pooling resources, commingling funds [and] becoming jointly liable on debts," she wrote.

The two women shared a home titled in Robertson's name. Gormley was responsible for her share of debts owed on joint credit accounts but had no claim to the house.

Van Nuys said it would be unfair for Robertson "to retain all the property, the home, the equity and the improvements and be responsible for only half of the jointly held credit cards she maintained during the relationship."

Gormley received cash for her share of the house, and the two split common debts. Other property, including furniture and cars, was divided between them.

Robertson's lawyer, Bryan Myre, said he was unsure whether his client would appeal. If an appellate court were to uphold the decision, it would set precedent in courts statewide.

In May, the state Supreme Court in the case of Vasquez v. Hawthorne ruled that a Seattle man's 30-year same-sex relationship was enough like a marriage to grant him a share of his deceased partner's estate. But that precedent never before had been applied in the breakup of a same-sex couple, Myre said.

State Rep. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, a gay member of the Legislature, told the *Yakima Herald-Republic* that Van Nuys' ruling was "fairly enormous for Washington state."

Ashland Center Considers Move

The Abdill-Ellis Lambda Community Center in Ashland—which has been sharing temporary quarters with a church for more than a year—is considering a radical move. In the latest issue of the nonprofit's newsletter, men's program coordinator Mark MacDougall writes that the time has come to consider relocating outside the "nice comfort zone" of the progressive southern Oregon city.

"Besides Phoenix or Talent, how about a storefront in downtown Medford within walking distance for the growing number of students attending Rogue Community College?" he suggests. "A bold and controversial spot may be the catalyst for new energy for our center as well as the catalyst for greater GLBT respect outside the comfort of Ashland."

MacDougall says the facility was forced to move into the basement of First Congregational United Church of Christ in order to get out of debt. He admits the center has gone through some rough growing pains during the past six years but hopes the community's financial support will help keep it alive.

For more information visit the Internet site www.abdellis.org.

Central Oregon Gets Organized

The Lesbian Network of Central Oregon is growing in membership numbers and expanding its range of activities.

It is holding monthly potlucks and dances and occasional drumming circles; if the interest is there, it also might begin a cancer support group. All lesbian, bi and trans women are encouraged to join the network's e-mail list so they can be notified about upcoming events.

For gay and bi men in Central Oregon, an active group holds monthly dinners, an annual barbecue and holiday parties. Interested people are encouraged to find out about the activities and get information and referrals for professional services.

For more information call the Lesbian Network of Central Oregon at 541-317-8457 or the Gay Rural Information line at 541-312-8881 or 888-429-6368.

Compiled by Jim Radosta *and* Sarah Leimert

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