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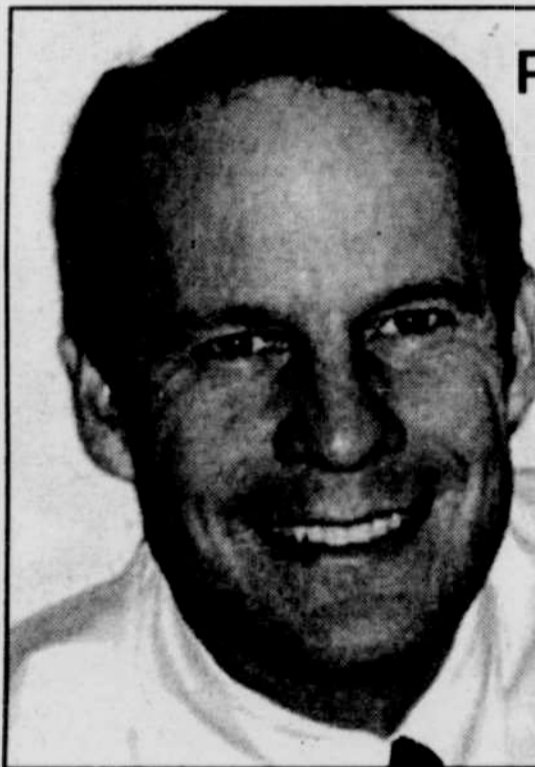
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NATIONAL news

STD STATS SHOW RISE AMONG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have published new national data on reportable sexually transmitted diseases—chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis.

While the data represent only a small proportion of the overall toll of STDs, the report reinforces that STDs continue to be a major health threat in the United States, with an estimated 19 million cases occurring annually. The report notes that chlamydia remains the most commonly reported STD, with more than 877,000 cases recorded in 2003.

However, because many cases are not reported or even diagnosed, the actual number of new chlamydial infections is estimated to be 2.8 million each year. Gonorrhea cases are at an all-time low in the United States, with some 335,000 cases reported in 2003.

Racial disparities and growing drug resistance in some populations and states remain key concerns. The U.S. syphilis rate increased again in 2003, rising 19 percent over a three-year period. Despite decreases seen among women and African Americans, the rate among men who have sex with men rose 13.5 percent between 2002 and 2003, and a whopping 68 percent between 2000 and 2003.

NEW ONLINE FORUM FOR THE BLACK QUEER COMMUNITY

A new online forum has been founded to serve the black same-gender-loving and transgender community. Leaders from around the country have come together and developed a members-only e-mail and bulletin board discussion group for members of the black queer community as well as progressive people of all ethnicities. It is designed to focus on topics of interest to black queers and share information about politics, entertainment, jobs, community events and more. To join, visit groups.yahoo.com/group/nationalblacks.



CUSTODY CASE TESTS SAME-SEX PARENTING OPTIONS

In a friend-of-the-court brief filed Dec. 8 the American Civil Liberties Union urged the West Virginia Supreme Court not to separate a 4-year-old boy from his surviving mother after the unexpected death of his biological mother.

After falling in love and committing to each other, Tina Burch and Christina Smarr decided to have a child together. The couple agreed that Smarr would carry their child. On Dec. 25, 1999, Smarr gave birth to Zachary. The couple raised Zachary together as a family until Smarr

was killed in an automobile accident June 1, 2002.

After Smarr's death, her parents, Paul and Janet Smarr, sought to take custody of Zachary. The trial court sided with Burch and awarded her primary custody, with visitation rights to the grandparents. The court found Burch to be Zachary's "psychological parent"—one who, while not related to a child biologically or through adoption, has functioned as a parent in every way. West Virginia appeals courts have recognized psychological parents in the past, but never involving gay couples.

The circuit court reversed the trial judge's ruling, deciding to remove Zachary from a parent he has lived with since birth and give custody instead to his grandparents. The case is now before the West Virginia Supreme Court on appeal. Burch has been allowed to maintain custody of Zachary pending a decision by the high court.

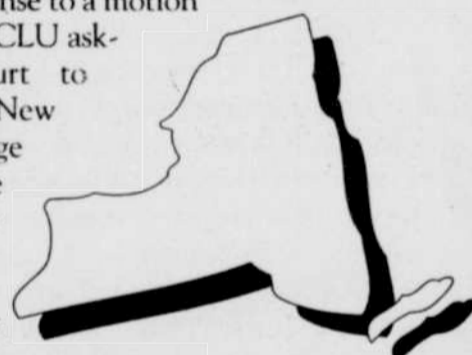
Oral arguments before the West Virginia Supreme Court are expected to take place in early spring.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE STILL AGAINST THE LAW

A trial court judge issued a decision Dec. 7 finding that the New York Constitution allows the state to continue to exclude same-sex couples from marriage.

The American Civil Liberties Union filed the lawsuit in Albany on behalf of 13 couples from throughout New York who wish to marry in the state. The court decision was issued in response to a motion filed by the ACLU asking the court to strike down New York marriage laws because they violate the state constitutional guarantees of equality, liberty and freedom of speech. Believing that it was bound by an 11-year-old case decided by a New York appeals court, the court allowed the marriage laws to stand.

The ACLU is evaluating its legal options for an appeal.



BIGOTS PUSH FORWARD IN CALIFORNIA

The Anaheim-based Traditional Values Coalition announced Dec. 6 that it would push bills to amend the California Constitution to specify that "the rights, responsibilities, benefits and obligations of a marriage shall only be granted, bestowed and conferred upon a man and a woman joined in a valid marriage and may not be conferred upon any other union or partnership." The bills were introduced in the Assembly by Ray Haynes, R-Riverside, and in the Senate by Bill Morrow, R-Oceanside.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force responded to the bills by stating: "The Traditional Values Coalition has a history of trying to hurt hardworking, taxpaying families simply because they don't fit their narrow definition of 'family.' Fortunately, the TVC is way out of touch with the values of Californians and most Americans. In the last election, national exit polls showed that more than 60 percent of voters support legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships through marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships."

