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NATIONAL news

LESBIAN COACH REACHES SETTLEMENT WITH TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL

Attorneys have negotiated a settlement agreement on behalf of an award-winning basketball coach at Bloomburg High School in Bloomburg, Texas, who alleged that officials tried to fire her because of her sexual orientation.

Merry Stephens was honored as a "Teacher of the Year" in 2004 and named "Coach of the Year" in three of her five years as head coach of the Lady Wildcats basketball team. During her award-winning tenure, she led the team to district, regional and semi-state championships, breaking several school district coaching



Award-winning lesbian coach Merry Stephens successfully fought the anti-gay school board of Bloomburg, Texas. She lost her job but received a settlement.

records in the process. Stephens also received excellent teaching evaluations throughout her tenure with the Bloomburg Independent School District. Wal-Mart named her one of its teachers of the year in 2004.

According to Stephens, shortly after Jerry Hendrick was promoted to superintendent of the school district in August 2003, she was subjected to intense harassment by Hendrick and other school officials because of her sexual orientation. The school board commenced proceedings Dec. 14, 2004, to terminate Stephens, with a year and a half remaining in her contract.

"Merry Stephens is an extraordinary coach whose leadership and teaching skills were highly respected on the basketball court and in the classroom," said Shannon Minter, National Center for Lesbian Rights legal director. "This settlement agreement sends a powerful message that discrimination will not be tolerated. The days when schools could discriminate with impunity against lesbian and gay teachers and coaches are past."

In exchange for Stephens' agreement not to pursue further legal action, the district agreed to pay her the full value of her two-year contract. The settlement came days before a scheduled administrative hearing, after school board president Derous Byers testified under oath in a deposition that the board's decision to terminate Stephens was based on the personal anti-gay animosity of several school board members. Byers also testified that several school board members publicly disparaged Stephens because of her sexual orientation, including stating that she "did not deserve to work" in the district because she is a lesbian.

"In my 15 years of representing workers throughout Texas, rarely have I seen such bigotry and flagrant discrimination," said attorney Michael Shirk of the National Education Association and Texas State Teachers Association. "Merry Stephens is an outstanding and commit-

ted teacher. I hope this settlement will teach the board members who set this in motion a lesson they should have learned a long time ago—that God's grace and the laws of this state protect everyone equally."

Stephens said: "My focus has always been to be the best coach and teacher I can be. No one should have to endure hostility and prejudice. I hope that by speaking out, I will give others the courage to stand up for their rights."

—Sarah Dougher

SAFE HAVEN

Connecticut has become the first state to recognize civil unions, unprompted and unpressured by the courts.

The Senate overwhelmingly approved the bill April 6 after nearly four hours of debate, giving gay and lesbian couples the same rights as married couples. Vermont has also passed civil unions, and same-sex marriage is approved in Massachusetts, but those advances came only after lawsuits.

While the bill is expected to clear the House as well, a poll found that while Connecticut voters are accepting of civil unions, they do not support same-sex marriage.

The survey, conducted by Quinnipiac University, revealed that civil unions were supported by 56 percent of registered voters, while 53 percent opposed marriage for same-sex couples.

Brian Brown, executive director of the Family Institute of Connecticut, said most voters do not support civil unions or same-sex marriage, calling its approval in the Senate "a slap in the face of democracy."

Conversely, Anne Stanback, president of Love Makes a Family of Connecticut, said she was "very proud to live in Connecticut today."

—Jaymee R. Cuti

MARRIAGE BANS HAVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Queers and allies in Michigan are wondering if voters intended to nullify all sorts of agreements between same-sex couples—from retirement benefits to domestic violence protection—when they voted to block their marriages.

Because of the broadly written same-sex marriage ban, phrased to entitle only one man and one woman to partnership rights, many peripheral benefits are being affected. The law also outlaws domestic partnerships and the future of civil unions in the state.

"There are unintended consequences of some of these measures because they're written so broadly," said Thalia Zepatos, deputy director of organizing and training for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

This broadly phrased ballot measure has also passed in other states, including Ohio and, most recently, Kansas.

Zepatos explained that partner abuse would not be considered domestic violence in states where such laws exist, hindering the granting of restraining orders and other protections.

In Michigan, laws defining marriage also block Ann Arbor Public Schools and other public employers from providing health and retirement benefits to same-sex partners of employees, according to a Christian law group.

According to the Thomas More Law Center, a 1996 state law and the 2004 constitutional amendment prevent the school district from offering benefits to same-sex couples in future contracts.

The school district, along with a union representing school employees, urged the court to dismiss the case on a technicality: The plaintiffs failed to meet requirements for filing suit, according to Seth Lloyd, an attorney for the district.

The court could also rule on the larger issue, leading the district to argue that state law does not preclude it from offering domestic partner benefits regardless.

—JRC