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northwest

Washington State Bans Discrimination

Bill creates statewide protection for sexual minorities
by Sarah Dougher

The Washington Senate passed a bill Jan. 27 protecting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people from discrimination, making Washington the 17th state to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and the seventh state based on gender identity. For procedural reasons the bill was sent back to the House, which already passed it. It now goes to Gov. Christine Gregoire, who pledged to sign it.

The bill passed on a largely party line 25-23 vote. A single Republican, former GOP leader Bill Finkbeiner, joined 24 majority Democrats in favor of the plan. Democrats Jim Hargrove of Hoquiam and Tim Sheldon of Potlatch voted against the plan.

The measure adds "sexual orientation" to a state law that bans discrimination in housing, employment and insurance.

A broad-based coalition of religious organizations, large and small businesses, civil rights groups and concerned citizens advocated for the bill. Leading supporters—including Washington employers Microsoft, Boeing, Corbis, Hewlett Packard, Nike and RealNetworks—weathered calls for boycotts by extremist organizations.

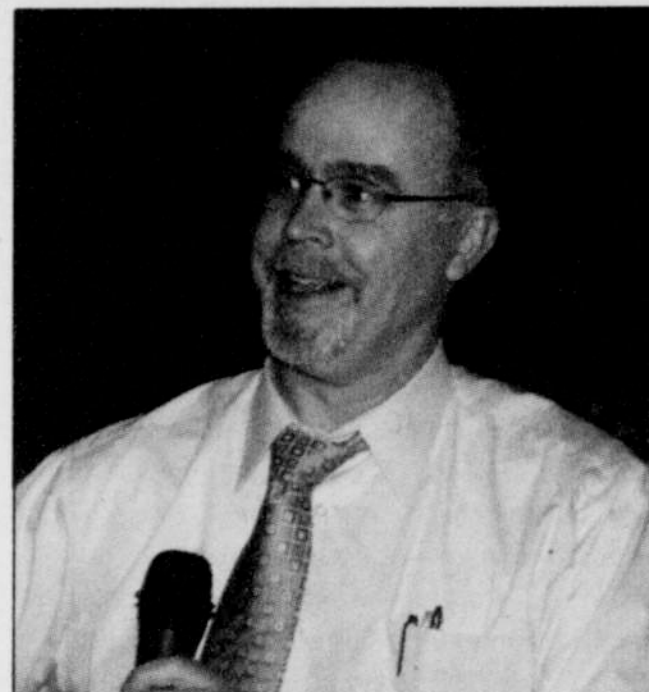
In a party that mirrored gatherings throughout the state, a group of about 20 supporters came together Jan. 27 at Northbank Tavern in Vancouver to celebrate in a warm and friendly atmosphere. Convened by the organizers of Vancouver's Pride festival, Saturday in the Park, the group was addressed by state Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver.

"This is one of the most moving things I've witnessed in my political career," he said. "I would have never thought this day would happen...where hearts are changed, laws are changed."

When asked how the legal changes made her feel, community activist Louise Debreczeny observed: "There is a subtle change in my own personal fear. I do feel different, more secure."

There was a palpable relief in the room as the group discussed issues such as coming out at public schools and local public sector jobs.

On the national level, Human Rights Campaign president Joe Solmonese noted: "States like Washington are picking up the slack as fairness remains stalled in Congress. More than one-third




State Rep. Jim Moeller thanked, among others, his "hunky boyfriend" for support in passing the landmark anti-discrimination bill.

of Americans now live in a state where it's illegal to fire a hard-working employee just for being gay. "Businesses support nondiscrimination protections because recruiting and retaining the best talent is good for their bottom line," said Solmonese. "Fair-minded consumers, employees and investors will not soon forget their leadership on ensuring fairness."

A sexual orientation nondiscrimination bill was first introduced in the Washington Legislature in 1976. It failed by one vote in the state Senate last year.

"This victory is another watershed moment in the struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Today, after 30 long years of struggle, the people of Washington state—through their Legislature—stood up to the threats, bullying and fear-mongering of the forces of political and religious extremism and said 'NO to discrimination!'"

Opponents of the Washington equality bill included Pastor Ken Hutcherson of Redmond's Antioch Bible Church, who threatened boycotts against corporations that supported the bill and urged people to buy up the companies' stock and dump it to drive prices down; the Washington State Catholic Conference; and the Faith and Freedom Network, an evangelical lobbying group.

"Thirty years is a long time to wait for equality," said Fran Dunaway, executive director of Equal Rights Washington. "With the passage of this historic legislation, Washington joins a growing list of states protecting every citizen equally. Equal Rights Washington is grateful for the continued nurturing and support of national organizations like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign and so many local groups like Religious Coalition for Equality, Greater Seattle Business Association, the Pride Foundation and Western States Center to achieve this long-sought victory." 



Louise Debreczeny (left) and Gina Hoggan work to organize Saturday in the Park, Vancouver's annual Pride celebration.



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