

Local Responses to Gay Marriage Developments

by Fred Coppersmith

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"All politics is local," the late Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil once observed. This has become increasingly clear to many members of the local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community in recent months as the escalated controversy over gay marriage—and the possibility of a constitutional amendment to ban it—has made national headlines. Many in central Pennsylvania are now faced with the possibility that rulings in Massachusetts, California, and elsewhere could drastically affect their own lives and the freedoms they are entitled to under the law. Same-sex marriages performed in those states could have consequences on a local level, a fact that has rallied many in Centre County to action.

President Bush's recent support of a constitutional amendment that would define marriage strictly as a union between a man and a woman has made many in the local community angry, said Sara Ryan, president of Allies at Penn State. While many others might not have wanted the issue to enter the national spotlight in quite this way, she believes that, if anything, it has only strengthened her group and its resolve.

Allies has undertaken a letter-writing campaign to student representatives in response to the recent controversy and hopes to organize further discussion forums for the LGBT community and their supporters.

"We actually have some people who have been contacting our group who had never been involved before," Ryan said, "but they're straight allies who are so outraged by Bush's showing of hatred that they really want to get involved."

"It's definitely something that's making people angry," she said, "and it's definitely something that I think has woken up some of our students. I think that people are talking about it a lot more, which is a really big deal."

Tom Donohue, a former Penn State student and an active member of the local LGBT community, agrees. Donohue is an educational and inspirational speaker for the group, Who's Positive?, which he founded in 2003 in order to raise HIV/AIDS awareness.

If President Bush passes the amendment and prevents two people from getting married, that is discrimination, Donohue said.

Talking about these issues, however, and fostering discussion on both a national and local level, can only be a positive step, he added. "This is great that New York and California are (performing) marriages," Donohue said, "because, the more you see that, the more the gay community is accepted."

Kerry Wiessmann also believes that the recent controversy—and, more importantly, the same-sex marriages which have caused it—can be a positive first step and offer a great deal of hope for those in the local area. Wiessmann is the Chair Person of Gay Affirming Interfaith Network, a group of faith-related organizations and communities in the Centre Region that openly welcomes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

“Whether or not the current same gender marriages are legal,” she said, “they are a terrific validation for the couples getting them and they send a message to the nation.”

In order to ensure that message is heard locally, GAIN has staged a number of events in recent months, including discussions among the local community about the ramifications that rulings in Massachusetts and California may have for LGBT people in Pennsylvania. On March 16, they co-sponsored a concert/coffee-house event at the University Baptist and Brethren Church to raise money for the Human Rights Campaign and the local “One in Ten” film festival sponsored by the Penn State LGBT Grad Student Alliance.

In October of this year, Wiessmann said, GAIN is “sponsoring a full-day workshop for people to discuss ‘Love, Marriage and LGBT Family Life.’ We expect this will be a good opportunity for people to find [out] about the 1000 civil rights associated with marriage, and why marriage is so important to LGBT people.”

Robert Passow, Integrity/Central Pennsylvania’s representative to GAIN, agrees. Integrity is a local advocacy group of Episcopalians with LGBT concerns

“All persons should be allowed to seek a union with a lifetime partner,” Passow said. “All such unions should be entitled to equal treatment in all aspects of their life in our society.”

Any attempt to deny this equal treatment under the law, he insisted, is simply discrimination and to use religion as the basis for that discrimination is a clear violation of the separation of church and state.

“The constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage called for by President Bush is clear and unabashed discrimination against gays and lesbians and their families,” reads Integrity’s official statement. “It will do nothing to defend the institution of marriage and everything to deny equal rights under the law to a segment of the population.”

With that in mind, Integrity will encourage its members to support the Human Rights Campaign, America’s largest gay and lesbian organization, and to contact their Representatives and Senators to voice their disapproval of a constitutional amendment.

“I think that our members are, in general, very encouraged by recent events,” said Donald Hopkins, Integrity’s president. “To be sure, it has engendered some backlash, but with the kind of open dialogue that has been taking place I cannot but hope that the force of reason will ultimately isolate those who continue to argue that homosexuality is sinful and against the teaching of the Church.”

Even some of those in the local community who believe that gay marriage is incompatible with the teachings of Christianity have voiced their disapproval of the proposed amendment.

“As a member of the Catholic Church, I can tell you that the Church has one position on the issue: marriage only exists between a man and woman,” said Jessica Scott, co-founder of a new group within the Penn State Catholic Campus Ministry called Renew. “(But) as an American citizen, I do not approve of the mixing of religion and federal government and do not support the proposed constitutional amendment in any way.”

Renew works to provide a safe environment for LGBT Catholics and their allies and supporters and, at this time, does not have any plans for a response to recent events.

“Our purpose is not to challenge the Church or to become involved in politics at any level,” said Scott. “We exist to serve as a resource to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and allied community in our Church.”

Yet many supporters of the local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community intend to become involved. Many believe this is an issue that demands their immediate and committed response and that offers great opportunities for change.