

THE ^{portable} GAY & LESBIAN READER



Human rights network Brown bag lobbying

by Erin Goodman

They met casually over a brown-bag lunch in the North End Library, a diverse group of individuals with only one thing in common — a concern with human rights law in Nova Scotia.

The topic under discussion was inclusion of sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds for discrimination in federal and provincial human rights legislation. The workshop, entitled "Establishing a human rights network to enact changes in human rights law", was the first of series of meetings planned to bring a number of groups involved in fighting discrimination in our society together, to share information and discuss strategies for putting human rights issues first on the political agenda.

The concept for the umbrella group was developed through the initiative of the Atlantic chapter of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, under the direction of Hugh McKervell. McKervell and his staff started meeting with community-based groups last year to explore the possibility of forming an organization in Nova Scotia which would have a broad overview of issues of human rights at both levels of government.

The meetings resulted in agreement that while a human rights network was a desirable goal, limited resources and energy dictated that any umbrella organization formed around the issue of human rights should be non-organizational — a casual group with no executive structure or firm agenda. Lunch-hour forums

featuring topics of interest to participating groups were chosen as the best networking medium.

Speakers featured at the January 31st workshop were Richard Evans, a law professor at Dalhousie, and Maureen Shebib, a lawyer representing Lesbian and Gay Rights of Nova Scotia (LGRNS). Marie Dechman, Deputy Speaker of the N.S. government, was invited to participate in the panel, but cancelled the day before the event.

Shebib spoke of the efforts that LGRNS has made since 1987 to have sexual orientation included in the N.S. Human Rights Act. Initially, the group researched the successful enactment of human rights legislation to protect lesbians and gays in Ontario and Manitoba. From this experience, Shebib said, LGRNS identified "the need to develop and build on a broad base of public support, demonstrated in concrete and direct kinds of ways".

Last year, LGRNS made its "big push" for the protection of lesbians and gays in the N.S. Human Rights Act, persistently lobbying the provincial government and the N.S. Human Rights

Commission. According to Shebib, LGRNS had developed a good rapport with the Human Rights Commission staff, but the board of the Commission did not fully support the proposed amendment to the Act.

The lobby effort was ultimately stalled at the cabinet level of the provincial government. "We didn't get the legislation we wanted, but we certainly got it on the political agenda, and began to make strides in public education," Shebib said.

Shebib notes that the N.S. Human Rights Commission is looking to revamp the Act, which is, in her words, "generally piecemeal, chopped up, and needs to be rewritten from beginning to end," providing a convenient opportunity for the government to "just throw in a few more grounds for discrimination".

She warns that a change in human rights law has to be accompanied by less tangible changes in society. "Simply extending protection isn't adequate. We need to change public attitudes as well." Adds Shebib, "I'm fairly optimistic about Nova Scotia."

Make a choice

by John Carter

Sexuality varies according to our experience of it, permitting each of us to have our own sexual nature, just as we are entitled to other individual expressions of individuality.

Sexuality can be anything you wish it to be or care to imagine — holy, obscene, spiritual, symbolic, or transforming — and none of us is in any position to say which of these expressions are normal or abnormal.

Homosexuality, like any other expression of human sexuality, is most certainly not one expression only, nor can it be defined by any criteria of clinical labelling or religious doctrine. Unfortunately, we tend to identify ourselves with our own behaviour and become alarmed by the inconsistencies we find. If a man fantasizes himself making love with another man, yet does not act out this fantasy, is he homosexual? If he has had homosexual experiences, yet does not find them to his taste, is he homosexual because he has performed the act? If he has a closer relationship with his best friend than with his wife, is he latently homosexual any more than we are all latently thieves, geniuses, or anything else among the infinite possibilities of human nature?

Perhaps it might be more constructive to adopt the attitude that if you are happy with your life, if it offers you fulfillment in those areas where you seek it, you are normal for yourself. If you are unhappy with your life, if you feel that there is something wrong, if you feel trapped by the direction in which your desires move, you have a problem; but you are neither normal nor abnormal — you have simply not yet become yourself. How you choose to become the person you

wish to be — how you choose to discover the person you already are — is entirely your own affair, just as how you choose to express your sexuality is your own concern, provided it does not violate the free-will choice of anyone else.

Counsellors of all persuasions can provide insight and experience, but you alone have the final responsibility for living your own life. This can certainly be painful, but in my own experience, the pain is part of the process of growth, and any attempt to evade it only creates more confusion. So whether you are contemplating coming out of the closet or simply trying to determine which closet you may be hiding in, make sure that you have sufficient light on the situation to see clearly the direction you wish to follow.

Gay equity in B.C.

VANCOUVER (CUP) — Gay employees and faculty at the University of British Columbia can now get medical benefits for their spouses.

In the summer of 1989, Mary Bryson, an associate professor in educational psychology, was told her same-sex partner did not qualify for the health insurance benefits available to heterosexual couples.

The university's health care plan provides extended medical care coverage to university employees and their spouses, but until Jan. 1, 1990, this didn't include gay and lesbian spouses.

"As part of employment equity [the university] needs to address issues such as homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation," said Bryson.

Bryson said the health plan violated the non-discrimination clause in the faculty association's agreement with the administration.

"Making it a matter of policy gives us some degree of protection," said Bryson. "Unlike Ontario, [gays and lesbians] don't have human rights protection in the B.C. charter."

York and Acadia are the only other universities that provide extended health care coverage to same-sex spouses.

Bryson said heterosexual partners don't have to prove their commonlaw status to get UBC coverage, so the same standard will apply to same-sex couples.

Carleton activism

by Katie Swoger and Jacques Poitras

OTTAWA (CUP) — Gay rights activist Kenneth Gallagher still says Carleton doesn't do enough to protect the rights of gays and lesbians, even though the university says it does.

The university recently responded to Gallagher's complaint, filed last summer with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Gallagher and Pierre Beaulne took the university to the commission because they say the university has failed to curb discrimination against gay men and lesbians on campus.

In its official written response to the commission, the university says it "does not accept Mr. Gallagher's allegation that a poisoned environment exists for which the university is responsible."

Don McEown, secretary to Carleton's Board of Governors, wrote the response.

If the commission is satisfied the university is promoting an environment without discrimination, they will close the case, Gallagher said.

"I'm very optimistic that the Human Rights Commission will find that for a long time indiscriminate discrimination has taken place [at Carleton]."

Gallagher said Carleton officials had refused to meet with him over homophobic articles in the engineering student newspaper, and refused to take action against homophobic graffiti and vandalism.

The university said the anti-gay graffiti and defacement of posters, were under the student council's jurisdiction. It said it had taken "quick and effective" action against the engineering paper.

During that controversy, the engineering society was reprimanded by administration and was required to print an apology.

As well, the university does not take responsibility for threatening phone calls made to Gallagher, since they do not relate directly to the campus, the response states.