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•Gay Rights

Anti-gay referendum may affect Maine students

By Malcolm Smith
Staff Writer

The rights of students protected under the sexual orientation classification of the school's non-discrimination policy may be threatened if a state-wide organization gets a referendum question on the 1995 ballot.

Concerned Maine Families, a political action committee headed by Carolyn Cosby of Portland, delivered ten boxes of petitions, which Cosby claimed contained 66,502 signatures, to the Secretary of State in Augusta

two weeks ago. If certified, the following question would be placed on the state ballot in November of 1995.

"Do you favor the changes in Maine law limiting protected classifications in future state and local laws to race, color, sex, physical or mental disability, religion, age, ancestry, national origin, familial status and marital status and repealing existing laws which expand these classifications as proposed by citizen petition?" Dr. Suzanne Estler, director of UMaine's Equal Opportunity program said in an

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interview this week.

"I think probably, as you read the fine print, it could void our policy," she said.

The referendum would repeal Portland's equal protection ordinance for gays and lesbians, prevent other communities from enacting similar legislation, eliminating the classification of sexual orientation from Maine's Hate Crimes Act. The Maine Attorney General's office said the proposal would not prevent future protection under the Maine Human Rights Act.

The threatened ordinance in Portland protects gays and lesbians in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodation and credit. A bill vetoed by Governor McKernan last year would have offered the same protection state-wide.

CMF Vice Chairman Lawrence Lockman of Howland disagrees with equal protection.

"We believe the family unit—mother, father and children—is sieged by cultural and political elites determined to radically redefine what it means to be a family," he wrote in a recent newspaper commentary.

"The aggressive and unrelenting campaign to grant homosexuals protected minority status on an equal footing with racial and religious minorities is just one of several fronts on which this escalating civil war of values is being fought," Lockman wrote.

CMF did not return numerous phone calls and interview requests left with two of their officers.

Karen Geraghty, president of the Maine Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance, sees the petition drive as an attempt to subvert the democratic process.

"They really would like to do away with democracy and representative government," Ger-

aghty said. "Why don't we disband the state legislature?"

Rep. Kathleen Stevens who represents part of Orono agrees, citing the passage of the subsequently vetoed gay rights law.

"We passed the bill, and that's the message," Stevens said. "I think the referendum is a horrible idea."

Representatives John J. O'Dea and Mary Cathcart of Orono also oppose the bill. O'Dea expressed concern over the negative campaign which, he said, would be waged by both sides.

"It invariability turns ugly," he said.

People and groups have begun fighting the possible referendum. The Wilde-Stein Club plans to put all its efforts into opposing it, starting with a change in their club's purpose from social to educational, which doubled their budget to 900 dollars.

"We want to work for an inclusive environment, not a separate environment," Wilde-Stein Co-chair John Olesky said yesterday.

Despite some harassment, he said, he and the club are encouraged by the phone calls and messages of encouragement.

"People are coming out of the woodwork because they know this is wrong," he said.

Equal Protection Maine and a multi-organization group, tentatively called Maine Won't Discriminate have been formed, both with offices in Bangor.

EPM Bangor Co-chair Jim Martin said CMF twisted facts and blurred the term "privileges" with "civil rights."

Martin pointed out the damage that a campaign such as CMF's causes by creating a climate of hate and fear.

Martin said EPM is working to build coalitions and educate the Maine people about the ramifications of this bill.

Others are backing EPM, including the Maine Council of Churches and Bath Iron Works. Both the Maine Republican and Democratic candidates for Governor and Senate have also spoken out against the bill, as well as *The Bangor Daily News* in a recent editorial.

The *News* also spoke out against the measure in a recent editorial.

"The measure to outlaw all protections for sexual orientation should also be of concern for those who value self-determination, or the nearest thing a government has to it: local control," the August 22 editorial reads.

"Proponents of the referendum question keep talking about gay people wanting special rights, and, in one sense, they are correct. The rights in question are special... They are birth rights, and must not be surrendered because one group does not approve of another group."

Another supporter is Bangor business leader Ed Armstrong, who describes himself as a heterosexual with 6 children and 10 grandchildren. He said he used to be "ignorant" of the facts, and 15 years ago he might have bought CMF's arguments, but events such as working with one of Charlie Howard's attackers for the past 7 years has changed his mind.

Charlie Howard is the man who drowned 10 years ago after being thrown from a Bangor bridge by 3 teens who wanted to tell their friends that they "scared the homo."

"You just have to begin to point things out to people," Armstrong said, "Isn't life and growing up a growing process?"

Active in children's services, Armstrong said he has seen many foster children that would have been better off in a gay household, saying they would be safe and loved.

Asked if he had seen the "militant gay lobby" that Cosby cites for the near passage of the state-

wide gay rights law.

"They said the same things about Blacks in the '60's," he replied. "That's just a smoke screen."

Geraghty said this was an attempt of some people to force their religious beliefs upon the people of the state.

Geraghty said the gay issue was just "phase one" and only an issue for CMF to mobilize their followers.

"This is only the beginning," Geraghty said.

Lockman describes CMF as "a non-partisan, non-sectarian citizens group solidly in the mainstream of American culture and politics."

The possibility of a boycott looms in Maine, a state heavily dependent on tourism. Some say it is too soon to worry.

Martin said he would not encourage such a boycott because it would hurt all the citizens of Maine, gays and lesbians inclusive. He added that Colorado's boycott was held by citizens of other states.

"We can't afford to take that chance," Martin said.

Rep. Stevens expressed concern about potential students and the message passing the referendum would send.

Estler agrees. She said the passing of the referendum would hurt both enrollment and the recruitment of faculty and staff. She said she has already heard reports from faculty and staff that have had calls from out of state colleagues asking how they could live in such a hateful state.

Estler spoke of the climate of fear the petition drive was creating, and the problems the referendum would cause at a research facility such as UMaine.

"You can't have fear and a search for the truth," Estler said.