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Activist speaks to UMaine about hate crimes

By Keith Edwards
Staff Writer

Claudia Brenner, a gay and lesbian activist, spoke at the University of Maine Tuesday in a lecture titled "Claiming Our Voices: A Personal Experience."

Brenner, speaking for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told of her own terrifying experience of being shot while hiking with her lover on the Appalachian Trail in 1988.

Brenner was shot in the neck, arm, face and head by a homophobic killer. She managed to walk nearly four miles to get help, and survived the brutal attack.

Her lover was not so lucky. The killer's seventh shot exploded Rebecca Wright's liv-

er and ended her life.

The killer, Stephen Roy Carr, had stalked the two women to their campsite, where he watched them make love and then shot them both. He was arrested and convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison with no parole.

This tragedy led Brenner to become active in combatting anti-gay violence.

"I chose to speak about Rebecca because I think it's important to put names and faces behind the statistics," she said.

Brenner spoke about hate-inspired violent crimes against gays and other groups. "Whether you're gay or not, it (hate-violence) is frightening," she said.

According to Brenner, the people who harass gays are the same people who harass

other minorities, such as blacks or Asians.

Brenner spoke in a half-filled 101 Neville Hall to concerned students, faculty and other people from the area. She said hate-violence was designed to scare not just the individual victim, but the victim's entire community.

The gay community has worked with other civil rights groups to help the federal Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990 become law. This act mandates the collection of data on crimes involving race, religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity.

Homophobia, according to Brenner, is part of a larger problem.

"If we end gay violence, other forms of violence will subside," she said.

Brenner said homophobia is sometimes

organized, and sometimes is not. Carr, the man who shot Brenner and Wright, was not organized, but she said there are groups on the far religious right that are very sophisticated in their homophobic activities.

Brenner said Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Awareness week at UMaine is a very, very small start, and that combatting homophobia is something to be done constantly.

"At the University of Maine, there seems to be a lot of stuff on paper, but now it is time to put it into action," she said.

When asked what to do to help combat homophobia, Brenner responded that activist groups need to organize themselves, rather than being intimidated by the religious right.

"You have a lot of power if you choose to use it," she added.