

Between The Lines

Serving Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Friends

Stakes Rise in Michigan Holy War

A Personal View Inside the Religious Right

By Mark Weinstein

I was wearing a black skirt (comfortable attire on a hot summer day) and a black shirt to mourn the loss of freedom for gay people represented by the coming together of Christians seeking to destroy the gay and lesbian movement. One minute I was protesting as approximately 500 people came to a "Community Impact Seminar". The next minute, in a bizarre twist of fate, I was in the Temple Baptist Church, inside the belly of the beast, observing the right wing preach about empowering themselves in the name of Jesus to carry out their holy "civil war of values." It was an event that I will not soon forget: it is an event that we must reckon with, because they have declared war on us.

Following a tip-off, ACT UP/Ann Arbor organized to protest a seminar hosting right wing experts from the Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family organization. The invasion of Michigan by one of the most powerful anti-gay/lesbian organizations in the country would not go unnoticed.

The Community Impact Seminar was scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m. on August 20. ACT UP arrived at 6:30 p.m. to picket out front as right wing participants arrived in droves. Protest signs ranged from "Jesus Loves Me, Now I Know I'm Gay" (with a picture of a hunky man on a cross), to "ACT UP For Your Love Rights," to "Curb Your Dogma." The reaction of the Christian participants ranged from hostile glares to shouts of "Jesus loves you."

The ACT UP demonstration attracted 16 people (compared to hundreds going to the Seminar to learn how to politically defeat gays and lesbians). I felt a bit of trepidation as we stood outside. Soon, a man walked over, encouraging us to enter the church and listen to their messages of "truth." We did not want to pay a registration fee to listen to people preach hate. The man offered to pay for anyone who would attend. I decided to accept the offer because I wanted to know what it felt like to be inside their revival.

I had read a lot about Focus on the Family. Based in Colorado Springs--the city that National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) Director Torie Osborn called the "epicenter of hate"--they claim to have a staff of 1,400. (According to NGLTF's Scot Nakagawa, this is not true; he says they lie about their numbers.) They helped pass Colorado's anti-gay/lesbian/bisexual Amendment 2, and are now strug-

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gling to enforce it. Embold-ened by their success in Colorado, they are traveling the country to train other far right activists to pass similar anti-gay initiatives.

The Michigan Family Forum organization hosted the event. This group claims that safe sex really means "abstinence before marriage, faithfulness in marriage." They have a broad legislative agenda which includes taking over school boards and stopping abortion. In my skirt and dangling earring, I did not feel like I was walking into friendly territory.

But I was partially wrong. The man who paid for my registration with his \$100 bill was thrilled to introduce me to his friends inside. People shook my hand, and welcomed me. He just could not get the words out! They definitely were friendly—they wanted the queers to hear the word of God.

They are friendly for a very important strategic reason: they do not want to be painted as extremists. It is very important that Focus on the Family finds calm, reasonable ways to attack homosexuals.

Make no bones about it: their word of God means that they should be responsible Christians and steer the path of public policy. They attacked the liberal media, government, and academia, and explained how they can obtain the skills to establish a Christian rule in the United States. Greg Jesson of Focus on the Family declared that we were engaged in "a great civil war of values that will determine exactly where our culture will go in the next generation." He went on to say that "Christian people and their values played an influential role in public policy at the founding of America." Focus on the Family was their godsend to prepare them to do battle.

Why must they battle homosexuality? According to their curriculum, "a mutually faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is not only Scriptural, but studies show it is better for children, parents and the community." Their challenge is to cloak their messages in love of equal rights, confusing the public with the preposterous notion that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are gaining "special rights".

I tried to explain to as many people as I could that their "acts of love" were creating a climate of hatred, which helps to promote violence against people perceived to be gay or lesbian. Focus on the Family denies their role in this process. Indeed, they argue that gays and lesbians lie when we talk about hate crimes directed at us. It reminds me of Nazi revisionists who deny the atrocities of the holocaust.

It is crucial to this brand of right wing extremists that

they appear friendly and nice so that they can distance their rhetoric and images from the increased violence against gays and lesbians. To some extent, the national media and even some gays and lesbians have been fooled by this obfuscation because nobody wants to believe that gentle, caring, polite people are complicit in heinous crimes. There is nothing polite about people lying in pools of their own blood because someone was offended by who they chose to love.

The right wing wins over their audience by offering more than dry biblical arguments for political action. We were subjected to Fundamentalist Christian humor, which was worse than a television sitcom. But the humor was conveyed in a warm style that seduced listeners into the Focus on the Family community.

For example, Jesson warmed up the crowd by relating a story received in one of the 250,000 letters he claims the organization receives *each week*. The story involved a young girl who listened to her mother's chest after being told that "Jesus lives in your heart." When asked what she heard, the little girl replied, "It sounds to me like he's making coffee now."

I was relieved when the coffee break arrived. One woman approached me and asked if I was gay—a brilliant guess on her part. She went on to tell me that she cares about the environment, and is concerned about the effects of PCB's and other toxins in the Great Lakes Bioregion. No disagreement here. She continued with a warning that these chemicals have caused female-female pairings of herring gulls—demanding that I think about this as part of my personal situation!

Before having a chance to respond to her absurdity with a long list of pre-industrial gays, they informed us that break was over. I decided to leave; I could not stomach anymore. I left wondering how Michigan's various communities will handle this growing threat.

The seminar is laying the groundwork for major campaigns to take over school boards, fight pornography, stop abortion, and pass anti-gay/lesbian legislation. They are acquiring massive mailing lists and grassroots support which will place them in a strong position for success in their efforts.

Meanwhile, back outside some people had stayed to protest. One ACTUP member related the story of a car which slowed down upon seeing the demonstrators. The car stopped and the driver got out. The protesters nervously watched to see what this person might do to them. The man opened his vest to reveal his shirt underneath. The shirt had one word printed on it: "gay." ▼