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The Newsletter of BLIND LGBT PRIDE INTERNATIONAL

Blind Pride is a Special Interest affiliate of the American Council of the Blind and is dedicated to facilitating the free exchange of ideas, opinions and information relative to matters of concern to blind people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender Visit us at www.blind-lgbt-pride.org

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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##FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

By Don Brown

I hope each of you have had a wonderful holiday season and I wish you a happy, healthy and prosperous new year. Similar sentiments were directed to you as members by President and Mrs. Obama via their beautiful holiday greeting card addressed to Blind LGBT Pride.

As we turn the page on 2009 and look toward the challenges of 2010, this seems like a good time to take a moment to revisit some of the many accomplishments Blind Pride achieved this year.

Topping the list is the membership voting to change the name of the organization from Blind friends of Lesbians and Gays (BFLAG) to Blind LGBT Pride International (Blind Pride). I am happy to report The new name has been positively received and is generally viewed as being a more overall affirming image and better aligned with who we are and our mission.

Along with the new name came a new web address and presence. If you haven't heard by now, our new on-line address is www.blind-lgbt-pride.org. The new and improved site not only contains information regarding convention activities, newsletters, it is an authorized virtual LGBT Community Center.

You are invited to participate in Blind Pride's monthly board meetings, which are now open to members and anyone else who might be interested. Visit the site to learn how you can participate in the meetings.

The Awareness Through Accessibility Project is now underway.

Blind Pride is in partnership with LGBT Community Centers across the country to assist them with ensuring that their programs and services are accessible to and usable by individuals who are blind and vision impaired specifically and people with other disabilities in general. Blind Pride has developed and placed on our web site for downloading, a variety of access, awareness, etiquette and program accessibility resources. These resources are being made available, at no cost, to LGBT Community Centers across the country.

Our new brochure is now complete. This more concise revision is available in alternate formats.

Blind Pride hosted a very successful convention in Orlando with approximately 130 individuals attending our programs and activities.

We managed to satisfy the IRS endless requirements related to the name change and the modification the organization's non profit tax status, from a private foundation to a public charity.

We have embarked upon an extensive fundraising campaign. Visit the website to learn more.

This year it was decided to increase the number of publication dates for this newsletter. You can look forward to receiving your copy of InsideOut in December, March, June and September.

These accomplishments and others have only been possible as a result of you the member making your wishes known and a team effort shown by Blind Pride's board of directors.

As we look forward, I like to ask your help with planning our 10 year anniversary conference, scheduled for July 9th through the 17th, 2010, in Phoenix Arizona. More about how you can help in the pages of this newsletter. Visit [blind-lgbt-pride](http://blind-lgbt-pride.org) for up to date convention information.

Again, the best of the New Year to you and I hope you find interesting this edition of InsideOut.

NH gay couples to start New Year with wedding vows

Jeffery Burr and Neil Blair are just hours from their wedding, but there are no typical prenuptial jitters. After all, this is the third time they've exchanged vows.

They first committed to each other before scores of relatives and friends on June 24, 2006, in an emotional ceremony that didn't even count under New Hampshire law. Then, at 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2008, the first moment they were legally able to do so, they became civilly committed in a more subdued ceremony.

This time, the two will finally be legally married on January 1st, when New Hampshire becomes the fifth state to allow gay couples to wed.

Instead of a \$5,000 weekend celebration like they had in 2006, they'll have a brief rereading of their earlier vows, pop the cork on some champagne and have dinner together.

"It's the third time," Blair said. "How excited are you supposed to be?"

The ceremony is more about pronouncing their civil equality than restating their commitment to each other, they say.

"It's a right that's been afforded to us, and it's our responsibility to take advantage of it," Blair said.

Burr and Blair, of Franconia, don't legally need to hold a marriage ceremony. By law, their civil union - and any other civil unions still valid - would convert to a marriage in 2011 if they did nothing, or they could expedite the status change by filing marriage paperwork with their town clerk during 2010.

The marriage law grants no new rights to gays, who two years ago won the right to civil unions, but it eliminates the separate status so both heterosexual and homosexual couples will be considered married.

Democratic Gov. John Lynch, who personally opposes gay marriage, signed the legislation after lawmakers passed key language affirming religious rights. The law spells out that churches and religious groups can't be forced to officiate at gay marriages or provide other services.

Through late December, 40 gay couples had applied for marriage licenses valid for 90 days, said Stephen Wurtz, acting director of the state division of vital records. In 2009, 188 civil unions were performed with eight licenses still outstanding. Forty-two civil unions have been dissolved, though some were performed in Vermont. In 2008, 621 civil unions were performed.

Some couples - like Burr, 51, and Blair, 46 - plan to wed quickly. A few may gather at the Statehouse to ring in the New Year by exchanging vows in a general celebration. Others want to wait to honor non-legally binding commitment anniversaries from years past.

Canterbury residents Beth McGuinn and Ruth Smith, like Burr and Blair, spent thousands of dollars on a commitment ceremony in 1993, then exchanged civil union vows right after midnight Jan. 1, 2008, wearing mittens and caps around a campfire. Smith, 46, remembers getting goose bumps, not from the cold but from watching state Sen. Harold Janeway, a justice of the peace, sign their paperwork making their union official.

They plan to get married, but not until Oct. 2, the date of their original commitment ceremony.

"This is big. It may not give us anything more, but we have fought almost two decades for this," said McGuinn, 48. "The word marriage means a lot. It's universally recognized. It's not about rights. It's about being accepted. It's about being part of the community and part of society."

The retired Rev. Eleanor McLaughlin and her partner of 19 years, Elizabeth Hess, of Randolph, climbed a mountain and exchanged rings the summer of 1991 but didn't enter a civil union. They waited for marriage. Both devout Episcopalians, they designed their ceremony Saturday to reflect the state's role in civil marriage and their church's role in blessing the union.

McLaughlin, 74, and Hess, 62, plan on exchanging marriage vows in the vestibule of St. Barnabas Church in Berlin, then following with a church ceremony at which Episcopal Bishop Gene V. Robinson, who is openly gay, will bless the union.

Winter's starkness is their wedding theme.

"We want people to recognize we had to wait a long, long time," Hess said.

New Hampshire joins Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut and Iowa in allowing gay marriage in a move that reflects the state's changing demographics from reliably Republican and conservative to younger and more liberal.

Judge says televised Prop. 8 trial possible

The federal judge presiding over an upcoming trial on California's same-sex marriage ban says he is considering seeking permission to broadcast the proceedings.

The governing body for federal courts in Western states last week approved a pilot program that would for the first time allow cameras in civil trials being decided by judges.

Chief U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker said in an order issued Wednesday that he wants to record or webcast a Jan. 6 pretrial hearing as a test run for the trial, in which he'll consider a constitutional challenge to California's voter-approved gay marriage ban, known as Proposition 8.

Lawyers representing sponsors of the ban, approved by voters in 2008, have said they oppose having the trial broadcast outside the courtroom.

##DC City Council votes to legalize gay marriage **December 15, 2009**

After suffering setbacks from California to New York, Maine to New Jersey, same-sex marriage supporters got a victory with the City Council's vote to legalize gay marriage in the District of Columbia.

Gay couples could begin tying the knot in the district as early as March. The only hurdles left to clear are the city's mayor, who has promised to sign the bill, and Congress, which has final say over laws in the nation's capital. The district's nonvoting delegate to Congress, Eleanor Holmes Norton, said she expects no opposition there.

"Make no mistake, 2009 has been one hell of a year for marriage equality," said David Catania, who introduced the bill and is one of two openly gay council members.

Council members said that it was symbolic that the nation's capital had voted to pass gay marriage. But the city is also in many ways not representative of the nation. More than three quarters of the voters in the city of 600,000 are registered Democrats.

Patrick J. Egan, a professor of politics at New York University, called the city "the most liberal and Democratic-party-dominated jurisdiction in the United States."

Congress now has 30 working days to act on the bill, but it has rejected legislation just three times in the past 25 years.

"I believe I have assurances that the barn door is locked," said Norton, a Democrat who called the legislation "historic" and said she was "proud" of the council.

The 11-2 vote was no surprise. Two members voted "I do" when their names came up, and when the vote finished a packed chamber erupted into cheers and applause. The "no" votes included former Mayor Marion Barry, now a council member.

If the bill becomes law, the district will join Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts and Vermont in issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. They will be able to wed in New Hampshire starting in January.

Gay marriage supporters have had less success elsewhere recently. Maine voters overturned the state's same-sex marriage law last month. Earlier this month, the New York state Senate rejected a bill that would have allowed gay couples to marry.

The New Jersey Legislature, which had been working on a same-sex marriage bill, postponed a recent vote when the measure appeared headed for defeat. Sponsors now want the Assembly to consider it first, but that probably won't happen until after the new year, if at all.

The vote in the district came after several months of discussion, including two marathon council hearings at which some 250 witnesses testified.

Opponents included the Archdiocese of Washington. The Archdiocese said it might have to stop providing adoptions and other services because the law would force it to extend benefits to same-sex couples, violating church beliefs.

But most who testified were supporters. Some, teary-eyed, asked the council to let friends, relatives or themselves marry. One man proposed to his partner during his testimony.

Opponents, however, said the issue is far from settled. Members of a group called Stand4Marriage, led by local pastor Bishop Harry Jackson, have met with members of Congress to urge them to oppose the bill.

An attorney for the group, Cleta Mitchell, said that after the bill goes to Congress, the group will ask the district's board of elections to allow a referendum on the ballot asking voters to overturn it.

But they face an uphill battle.

The group Mitchell represents made a similar request this summer, when the city passed a law recognizing gay marriages legally performed in other states. The board declined to put the issue on the ballot, citing a city human rights law that bars discrimination.

Jackson said he believes this time the group has an "airtight legal case."

"If it gets to the vote, we win," he said, referencing the other states where residents overturned same-sex marriage laws.

The group also has another avenue of attack. It has a lawsuit pending from earlier this year, when it tried to get an initiative on the ballot in D.C. asking voters to define marriage as between a man and a woman. There, too, the elections board cited the human rights law in keeping it off the ballot. A hearing in that case is scheduled for January.

##CONFERENCE/CONVENTION 2010

The Downtown Phoenix Sheraton Hotel will be the place to be during July 9th through the 17th 2010. In conjunction with the American council of the Blind's 49th annual conference and Convention, Blind LGBT Pride International will celebrate its tenth year as an ACB Special Interest Affiliate.

Our Convention Coordinating Committee are at the initial planning stages and are interested in your suggestions for workshops, social events and side trips. You can help with the planning by becoming a member of the Convention Coordinating Committee and /or by forwarding your interest in joining the committee and any suggestions to convention@blind-lgbt-pride.org

MAKE YOUR RESERVATIONS NOW!

The home for Blind-LGBT-Pride International from July 9th through the 17th is the Phoenix Downtown Sheraton. Room rates are \$89 plus tax. Make reservations by calling 1-800-325-3535.

Be sure to say you are with the American Council of the Blind.

###BLIND LGBT PRIDE IN THE NEWS

###Blind LGBT Pride asked to present

Blind Pride has been invited to present a workshop at the Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC), to be held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, on February 19-21, 2010.

Invitation follows:

We are pleased to invite you to the 2010 Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Ally College Conference (MBLGTACC) at the beautiful University of Wisconsin-Madison! This year will be one-of-a-kind in its dedication to expressing the voices of marginalized peoples within the LGBTQ community. Our mission is Get Real — Confronting Privilege, Provoking Dialogues, and Building New Foundations. Our workshop presenters and speakers will further our message of inclusion and introduce participants to new and important perspectives.

The city of Madison has a long history of LGBT activism. We were the first state to include sexuality into its hate crimes legislation, and we also have numerous "out" politicians such as Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin, the first openly gay non-incumbent national congressperson, State Senator Tim Carpenter, and Assemblyman Marc Pocan. We have a vibrant queer community outside the classroom, as well as one of the most prestigious academic departments studying sexuality in the country.

We hope Blind LGBT Pride can join us February 19th-21st for MBLGTACC 2010.
Conference Overview

In the past decade, we have taken a giant step backwards in the name of LGBT rights. We have allowed transgender identities to be removed from vital bills such as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. We are dividing ourselves in a time when it is crucial for us to stand together and be allies to each other.

We use the term LGBT to describe a wide range of people's whose lives, identities, and voices are silenced in an attempt to form some arbitrary vision of cohesiveness. We are continually practicing biased and exclusionary policies that not only make members of our own community feel isolated, but also create a trend of invisibility; a curse we have all fought against. We, as the University of Wisconsin – Madison, feel it's time to wake up and confront our own privilege head on. That is why we are introducing the theme of MBLGTACC 2010 – Get Real!

Get Real means real discussion on racism in the queer community, instead of ignoring it. Get Real means real inclusion of transpeople, not just adding them to the back of our acronym. Get Real means voices will be heard, privilege will be challenged, and lives will be changed.

We will provide students an opportunity to gain valuable information from unique workshops and keynote speakers. They will also be able to network between each other and build cohorts of activists. We will introduce attendees to controversial topics and allow for honest conversation. We want students to leave the conference with a new outlook on social change.

So we invite you to join the new LGBTQ movement. A movement in which every voice is valued and heard. A movement which is a longtime coming.

This conference is in its 19th year and is the largest of its kind in the Mid-West, bringing together over two thousand participants.

##NATIONAL COLUMNIST SEEKS BLIND LGBT PRIDE'S OPINION

National columnists Dan Savage asked Blind Pride to comment on an inquiry he received having to do with sexual orientation and blindness. In short, one of the columnist's readers asked how could someone who cannot see have sexual attractions.

Our published response follows:

Dear Confused:

It is very important to separate a person's ability to see or not with physical attraction and sexual orientation. Your boyfriend may very well be conflicted regarding his sexual proclivities, but this is not due to blindness. Have you not known sighted individuals who have experienced this very same conflict?

The best we know, sexual orientation is based on a combination of genetic codes. It is innate, not a choice. Human beings do not need sight to know inside themselves whether they are attracted to members of the opposite sex or members of the same. Likewise, the eyes are not the only means through which sexual desire may be aroused. There are the ears, the nose, the sense of touch. Eye candy is fine and a great appetizer perhaps. But, sensuality is all about touch and synchronicity of rhythms. The flesh becomes a matrix of sensors that function most efficiently with eyes closed.

The fact that your boyfriend has admitted to you that he may be gay is indicative of the trust and openness of your relationship. If he has gone so far as to acknowledge the possibility of his being attracted to other men, you both owe it to that relationship to explore the matter further. You may want to suggest his seeking counsel from a gay-sensitive therapist. If there is a gay community center local to you someone on the staff there should be able to give you some referrals.

Blind LGBT Pride is an organization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people who also happen to be vision impaired. Some of the members have lost their sight late in

life after their sexual identity has been well established. Others, however, have been blind from birth. The latter have certainly have had their work cut out for them in terms of gaining acceptance from the greater sighted LGBT community, let alone hooking up with partners and being sexually fulfilled. This challenge is not so much owed to the individual's lack of sight as it is to our society's attitudes toward disability in general and blindness specifically.

Visit Blind LGBT Pride at
www.blind-lgbt-pride.org

CONNIES TRIVIA BOX

The longest known gay male relationship in the US was that of Gean Harwood (pianist/composer) and Bruhs (Bruce) Mero (a dancer.) They met in 1929 and stayed together for 66 years, until Metro's death in 1995. In 1997, Harwood published his book, The Oldest Gay Couple in America, which chronicles their lives together.

##IN REVIEW

##Trembling Before G-d **Film**

Can you be an orthodox Jew and be gay? Is there a way to reconcile those two worlds? This film talks to a number of orthodox Jews who are gay or lesbian and explores the difficulties they went through to reach some peace in their own lives. While some of them may have found peace, they are still rarely accepted by other orthodox Jews. This film was made by a gay orthodox Jew who understood the difficulties others in his position were facing. And in the end he found a way to accept his homosexuality while never turning his back on God. Other faiths need to explore this subject, since religions are the # 1 block in the path of gays seeking full inclusion in society.

##Two Spirits: A Story of Life with the Navajo **by Walter L. Williams and Toby Johnson** **Book**

You will never look at life the same way after reading this book. Writer W. Randy Haynes says about this fascinating novel, " 'Two Spirits' is a spectacular tale based on the 1860s eviction of the Navajo people from their sacred homelands.... 'Two Spirits,' a treasure to read, is a rare combination of historical fiction and spiritual wisdom at its absolute finest."

Winner of a historical fiction award from the Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation, this novel from gay spirituality Lethe Press centers on a love story between a Native American male and a Caucasian male. The main character is a Navajo (Dine') Indian who is a "nadleehi" which is the Dine' word for berdache or Two Spirit person. Anthropologist Walter L. Williams wrote the classic academic study of this subject: "The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture" (Beacon Press), and now he has teamed up with award-winning novelist Toby Johnson to produce a fictional treatment of this theme. Their collaboration is a model for an academic scholar to provide the historical and ethnographic accuracy about a subject, which in the skilled hands of a fiction writer like Toby Johnson results in a fascinating story that is difficult to put down.

Two decades ago Williams' book had a huge impact on gay self-acceptance by showing examples of cultures where androgynous homosexual people were highly respected and held leadership roles in their native cultures. This novel is likely to have an even greater impact than Williams' academic book because it is written within the context of an exciting drama.

The setting is the Civil War era, and a young Virginian is forced to leave his home when his fundamentalist Christian father discovers him having sex with his boyfriend. He manages to escape to the frontier and be appointed as government agent to the Navajo Indians, only to find that the Navajos are being kept as virtual prisoners on a barren reservation far from their homeland.

The plot of the novel carefully follows the reality that actually happened to the Navajos in the 1860s, when the U.S. Army conducted a genocidal war against them and literally starved them into submission by destroying their food supplies, farming fields, and animal herds. Once the Indians surrendered they were put into concentration camps and then forced to march on a 325 mile journey where over 2,000 Navajos died. More deaths followed as people wasted away on the barren desert reservation.

After falling in love with his Navajo partner, the Virginian decides to help the Navajos escape their prison so that they can return to their homeland. The adventures which they undergo, in which they almost get killed several times, finally result in victory. As actually happened in 1868, by a fantastic sequence of events the Navajos are allowed to return to their beloved homeland and resume their indigenous way of life. As a result of this return, the Navajos were able to survive as a culture when many other Native American groups became extinct. This is real history, as dramatic as any story in World History.

In the process of helping the Navajos, this Virginian learns much about Navajo philosophy of life. This is a model for a positive way to approach one's life, and there are many insights that can be drawn from Navajo wisdom. Navajos respected the important role of eroticism in life, and recognized that people we would today called transgender or androgynous are extraordinarily gifted. Editor Bo Young, of "White Crane Journal" says "With its sweet and triumphal love story, 'Two Spirits' is a welcome addition to the

literature of the real West and the hidden history of same-sex people. It gives a whole new meaning to 'how the West was won.' ”

If you want an exciting read, as well as insight for how to best live your life, this is the book for you. I highly recommend it, for young GLBT people just coming out or for mature readers who want a guide to a higher plane of existence. As an additional bonus, there is also an interesting Afterword by gay Navajo anthropologist Professor Wesley Thomas. He gives personal testimony for the continuing impact of those events in the Civil War era among Navajo people of today, and comments that a same-sex marriage might have been the saving grace for his people's very existence.

##Celluloid Closet **Film**

Who knew Hollywood was soooooo gay? OK, we all did. But this film showcases exactly how gay Hollywood was, especially during a period in history when being gay was outlawed on screen. If you check this site, you will see some very gay films from 1919 and the 1920s. But what passes for gay in the 1930s and '40s is hardly gay at all. There was a crackdown, and gay for outlawed. Still, filmmakers found ways to sneak some fabulous behavior into their films, right under the noses of the censors. It's a very well made and entertaining film, which is based on the book by Vito Russo.

##2010 MEMBERSHIP DUES

Dear Blind Pride Member,

It is once again time to renew your membership in Blind LGBT Pride. Membership in our affiliate is \$12.00 per person per year (\$6 for students) and entitles each member to receive our quarterly newsletter "InsideOut", produced electronically (via email), large print and on cassette.

All subscriptions and memberships run on a calendar year--January 1 through December 31 and checks may be made payable to Blind-LGBT-Pride and sent to George Abbott , Treasurer, 6242 Levi Court, Springfield, VA 22150. Or, if you prefer, dues may be paid electronically via our web site. Visit www.blind-lgbt-pride.org and click on "Membership Information & Dues" You can either use paypal or a credit card. If you belong to the DC, Texas or Tulsa affiliates you may pay your membership dues directly through them.

Blind-LGBT-Pride is an affiliate of the American Council of the Blind (ACB). Therefore, members of Blind-LGBT-Pride are members of ACB. As a member you are entitled to receive ACB'S MAGAZINE "THE BRAILLE FORUM." "THE BRAILLE FORUM is available in the following formats: braille, 4-track cassette, print, or text files on a compact disk. To receive THE BRAILLE FORUM VIA E-MAIL, SEND A

MESSAGE TO BRAILLEFORUM-L-SUBSCRIBE@ACB.ORG.

I must supply the national office of the American Council of the Blind with a list of Blind-LGBT-Pride members by March 15, 2010. Therefore, in order for your name to be included for voting purposes at Blind Pride's next annual election, please pay your dues no later than February 28th, 2010.

Blind_LGBT_Pride is a rapidly-growing and vital organization dedicated to providing its members with a forum for the expression and exchange of views concerning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people who are vision-impaired as well as promote integration into the greater LGBT community. We thank you for your continued support.

Please feel free to contact me with any comments, problems or suggestions by sending an email to Membership@Blind-LGBT-Pride.org.

Thank you.

George Ashiotis
Membership Chair
Blind-LGBT-Pride.org

##AROUND THE WORLD IN BRIEF
GETTING SEX CHANGE SURGERY HAS BECOME MORE DIFFICULT
IN THAILAND

Thailand has issued rules making sex change surgery more difficult - including a requirement that potential candidates cross-dress for a year - over fears that some patients are rushing into the operation.

Transsexuals and transgender men are a common sight in Thailand, appearing on soap operas and working at all levels of Bangkok society, from department store cosmetics counters and popular restaurants to corporate offices and red-light districts. A national transgender beauty pageant draws thousands to the beachside town of Pattaya every year.

But over the past two years, a rash of castrations, especially among young men, has alarmed the medical establishment and prompted the new rules.

Dr. Sampanth Komrit of the Medical Council of Thailand said the new rules went into effect in November and requires a person to wait a year after deciding on the surgery. The applicants must be over 18 and are required to dress in women's clothing for the year before surgery. It also requires a mental evaluation before the surgery and continued follow-up visits with a psychiatrist after getting the sex change.

"This is a very important decision in their life," Sampanth said. "After the operation, there is no way to fix it."

Last year, Thailand's Health Ministry ordered hospitals and medical clinics to temporarily stop performing non-medical castrations. The ministry said that the procedure needed stricter monitoring.

Sampanth said he understood the motivation for sex change surgery, adding that he has met many men who insist they would be happier being a woman. But he said the new regulations give them the opportunity to think through their decision.

"This is not a small thing, not like going shopping. Especially the teenagers think carefully. Don't do it because your friend did it," Sampanth said.

Patients with a long history as cross-dressers would be exempt from the one-year waiting period, he said.

##Cult of Conservative Christian GOP-ERS Backs Death Penalty for Gays With HIV **By Stephen Webster**

The African nation of Uganda is weighing a bill that would impose the death penalty on HIV positive men who have committed what it calls "aggravated homosexuality." As if that were not shocking enough, a U.S. author is claiming that a secretive group of American politicians appear to be a driving force in seeing the proposal become law.

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009, heavily supported by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, was first read in October, triggering a wave of condemnation. According to the gay blog Queerty, Joann Lockard, public affairs officer at the Kampala, Uganda embassy, said the law would "constitute a significant step backwards for the protection of human rights in Uganda."

She added: "We urge states to take all necessary measures to ensure that sexual orientation or gender identity may under no circumstances be the basis for criminal penalties, in particular executions, arrests, or detention."

While that condemnation by a U.S. official would seem reflexive, others in U.S. political circles are providing financial and political support for the bill's sponsors, according to author Jeff Sharlet.

Sharlet's book "The Family" is an investigative look at a secretive group of fundamentalist Christian lawmakers in Washington, D.C. In a recent interview with NPR's Terry Gross, he broke the news that The Family's influence in Uganda is rife.

"[The] legislator that introduced the bill, a guy named David Bahati, is a member of The Family," he said. "He appears to be a core member of The Family. He works, he organizes their Ugandan National Prayer Breakfast and oversees a African sort of student leadership program designed to create future leaders for Africa, into which The Family has poured millions of dollars working through a very convoluted chain of linkages passing the money over to Uganda."

And how did Sharlet discover the connection? "You follow [the] money," he said. You look at their archives. You do interviews where you can. It's not so invisible anymore. So that's how working with some research colleagues we discovered that David Bahati, the man behind this legislation, is really deeply, deeply involved in The Family's work in Uganda, that the ethics minister of Uganda, Museveni's kind of right-hand man, a guy named Nsaba Buturo, is also helping to organize The Family's National Prayer Breakfast. And here's a guy who has been the main force for this Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda's executive office and has been very vocal about what he's doing, in a rather extreme and hateful way. But these guys are not so much under the influence of The Family. They are, in Uganda, The Family."

Under current Ugandan law, homosexuality is a crime punishable by life in prison. The proposed law would not just condemn HIV positive gay men and "repeat offenders" to death, it would also jail for three years anyone who knows a gay man but refuses to report them to authorities. Further, anyone who defends in public the rights of gays and lesbians would be subjected to a seven year prison term.

In his NPR interview, Sharlet said the bill would "very likely" pass and become Ugandan law. He added that the nation's president, whom he called a "dictator," has long been in The Family's fold.

"The Family identified [Museveni] back in 1986 as a key man for Africa," he said. "They wanted to steer him away from neutrality or leftist sympathies and bring him into conservative American alliances, and they were able to do so. They've since promoted Uganda as this bright spot -- as I say, as this bright spot for African democracy, despite the fact that under their tutelage, Museveni has slowly shifted away from any even veneer of democracy: imprisoning journalists, tampering with elections, supporting -- strongly supporting this Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2009." Canada and the U.K. have been leading the international charge against the proposed law, with both prime ministers Gordon Brown and Stephen Harper condemning it.

"Addressing the Commonwealth People's Forum, Stephen Lewis, the former UN envoy on Aids in Africa, said that the Bill made a mockery of Commonwealth principles," the Times Online reported. "Nothing is as stark, punitive and redolent of hate as the Bill in Uganda," Lewis said.

"We needn't tell you: The implications are dire," opined Queerty. "It's not abnormal for foreign heads of state, like Museveni, to have ties to American politicians. But he's deeply routed in a secretive organization that promotes hatred under the guise of loving Jesus."

And the very people -- America's elected officials who believe in human rights -- we would expect to pressure Uganda's lawmakers not to make such a bill law are turning out to be its biggest supporters."

##S.F. getting its fill of 'service animals'

It is not your imagination. There really are more dogs strolling through public spaces with their owners. Animals are going where they have never gone before.

"In San Francisco, it is just so much more in your face," says Emily Simone, a senior field manager for Guide Dogs for the Blind. "In the '80s and especially in the '90s, I've just seen an explosion. We've become animal obsessed. The East Coast and San Francisco are particular hotbeds for advocacy."

San Francisco has become a city filled with "service animals," meaning the owner has a permit that allows him or her to take their dog, cat, or snake (seriously) into restaurants, libraries, and often even rental properties that don't allow pets. In 2004 the city's Animal Care and Control Department issued 244 permits. In 2008 the number was 500, and interim director Rebecca Katz speculates that 2009 numbers are at least as high.

Unfortunately, the practice of granting service animal permits so generously is undercutting the intent of the law. Permits that allow an animal full access to buses, restaurants and public places should go only to service animals that perform a specific task and it seems too often that's not happening. That needs to change.

A good example of the problem can be seen on Haight Street. Residents complain that many of the street bullies have intimidating dogs, often pit bulls, which they take into restaurants and stores.

"They go into a restaurant, sit down with the dog, and when the owner says he doesn't allow dogs, they show him a service animal tag," says Bill Herndon, who works for the SFPD's Vicious and Dangerous Animals Unit. "The police are called, they see the tag, and that's the end of the discussion."

Actually, Katz says, they don't even need a permit.

"The Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't require the animal to have a tag," she says. Owners just need to say, "This is a service animal."

The ADA legislation, enacted in 1990, is so vague that it has created two classes of service animals. The first is for animals that perform a specific task - Guide Dogs for the Blind, wheelchair assistance, hearing dogs, and animals that can detect medical emergencies, like seizures, and summon help.

The problem is the second classification - emotional support animals. All animals - lizards, chickens and snakes - have been designated service animals because they lend emotional support to the owner. In most cases they have no task-specific training.

"People can't believe there isn't some kind of official licensing or training," Herndon says. "I think the policy is misused and abused."

Technically, there is a licensing process, but it is hardly restrictive. Katz says her office requires a valid license, a local address, a signed affidavit saying the owner needs a service animal, and a letter from a doctor. After that, the permit is issued with no questions asked.

Katz says that in the case of vicious or aggressive behavior, an officer like Herndon can cite the owner, confiscate the dog, and even have the animal put down after a hearing. That's fine, but it leaves enforcement for after the fact. What if the dog just growls? Is that enough to lose the service animal designation?

What's really needed is a change in the ADA legislation. No one is saying there shouldn't be an allowance for emotional support, but it should be a different kind of permit. It is terrific that your hamster makes you feel better, but you shouldn't get to take him on the bus.

Simone says organizations like the Coalition of Assistance Dog Organizations have been lobbying to change the ADA to narrow the definition of a service animal. She thinks federal changes could come as soon as this summer.

Until then, watch your fingers. That service animal on the bus may have no more training than a squirrel. And in this city it might be a squirrel.

##Letters to the editor

Dear Editor:

In the Fall, 2009 issue of InsideOut, the "Ask Dot" question inspired quite a few thoughts regarding being friends with a person who has changed in a core way. I don't know about you, but I've been surprised at my own reaction to a person simply changing their first name. Why should it have mattered whether the lady I've known as Carol, decided to become "Laura." It was certainly not because I didn't like the name "Laura." Perhaps she changed her name to escape from something, but I thought it was an extreme way of doing it.

In the early 1980s, I wouldn't have given it a second thought if Carol married and changed her last name. It was the norm then. Now I'm aware that more women don't change their last name when they get married.

I suppose I could have asked Carol why she chose to become Laura, but I didn't. Not

knowing where she is now, I'll likely never know her reasons. However, I know another lady who changed her name from Nina to Autumn. I hypothesize two reasons. First, she had a beloved cat she named Autumn and, secondly, autumn is her favorite season.

When my oldest sister's daughter started college, she wanted a grown up name. "Nickie" was tossed out in favor of "Claire". Most of the family including her mom, still address her as Nickie, but I try to address her as Claire simply because I know what it's like to try to dispose of a childish nickname; in my case from Barbie to Barbara. It is not as easy as you might think because people who know me as Barbie may be with people who also know me as Barbara. My parents have kept Barbie so my friends and acquaintances that they talk with hear my nickname.

I can only begin to imagine the challenges a transgendered person and their family and friends must face in making not only a name change, but adjusting to a gender change as well. For the transgendered person, it is likely a relief to finally become who he/she has been all along. The challenge is in dealing with the reactions of other people. Most of us know what that's like whether we're gay or blind.

Only with a lot of courage and support from others can change begin to occur. I am especially glad, therefore, that Blind LGBT Pride is here for our community.

Barbara Mattson

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