

## *2 Decades On, Miami Endorses Gay Rights*

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More than 20 years after Anita Bryant's "save our children" crusade here led to the repeal of one of the country's first gay rights ordinances and galvanized the debate over gay rights in the nation, the Miami-Dade County Commission voted again today to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The commission's hearing chambers erupted in bear hugs, kisses and tears as the 13 commissioners voted 7 to 6 to amend the county's antidiscrimination law to prohibit unequal treatment of homosexuals in housing, employment, credit and finance and public accommodation. Many who remember Ms. Bryant's campaign for repeal of a similar law in 1977 saw today's action as a vindication laden with symbolism and historical significance.

"It says that we've grown up," said Carlos Hazday, 40, an accountant who was manager of Safeguarding American Values for Everyone, or SAVE Dade, as the pro-amendment campaign called itself. "We're not perfect, we still have differences, but we're learning from our mistakes."

Gay rights advocates and Miami-Dade officials agree that the vote reflects a national change in attitude as Americans have become increasingly tolerant of equal rights for homosexuals. Miami-Dade has also grown into a metropolitan area of more than two million people that prides itself on its ethnic diversity and is trying to sell a world-class image. Officials say it cannot afford to be perceived as intolerant of homosexuals.

The absence of a gay rights ordinance in the county was a particular thorn for the gay rights movement because Miami-Dade was the first major urban area in the country to pass legislation protecting homosexuals. But that show of leadership was severely eroded when Ms. Bryant, then a singer, advertising personality and devout Baptist who lived in Miami Beach but had a national reputation, led a campaign to repeal the gay rights law that was passed in 1977, calling it an attempt to legitimize "a perverse and dangerous" way of life.

At one point she argued the law was a license for homosexuals to recruit and molest children.

Two main factors appear to have helped propel the measure that was approved today after a similar bill was introduced last year but failed to make it to a final vote. One was the case of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming who died in October after he was kidnapped, beaten and left tied to a fence for 18 hours. The crime fanned outrage over hate crimes nationwide and became a theme here during the hearing that preceded today's vote.

"When you unleash hatred it's only natural that some people would run with it, and sometimes it becomes deadly," said Commissioner Jimmy L. Morales.

More important, many Miami-Dade political and civic leaders rallied behind the measure by arguing that intolerance was bad for an economy that depended on tourism and new investments. Other municipalities and counties in South Florida, including Broward County and Miami Beach, have already enacted gay rights legislation or laws extending benefits to domestic partners.

"Greater Miami is no longer a provincial, backwater town," Miami Beach's Mayor, Neisen Kasdin, whose city is a major draw of gay tourism, told the commission. "Let's not retreat from our destiny as a major international city."

Roman Catholic Church officials, who had sided with Ms. Bryant in the 1970's, did not take a stand on the debate this time, noting that the ordinance exempted religious organizations from its requirements. But opponents of the ordinance were mostly religious leaders and conservatives who derided the law as condoning homosexuality and as granting special rights for life-style choices or to a segment of the population that did not need them.

"Where are the ghettos and the housing projects inhabited by people discriminated against because of their sexual orientation?" asked Eladio Jose Armesto, of the Democratic League of Miami-Dade County. "There aren't any."

Led by local members of the Christian Coalition, who held a prayer vigil outside the building during the hearing, the measure's opponents said they would consider legal options, including gathering signatures to put the issue on the ballot for another repeal referendum

and campaigning against the re-election of the commissioners who voted yes. "Next election there'll be new commissioners in town," said Josh Morales, a Christian Coalition member.

National gay rights advocates say Miami-Dade is a highlight in a year when local governments around the country have passed two gay rights proposals but defeated five, and Maine became the first state to repeal its law protecting homosexuals from discrimination.

Eleven states, 27 counties and 136 cities have passed antidiscrimination laws protecting homosexuals, said the Human Rights Campaign, a national advocacy organization on gay issues, with fewer than 10 of the laws repealed. Although some studies have shown that few claims are filed under the laws, partly because many homosexuals are reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation publicly, supporters of the ordinances say they deter unfair treatment and set a tone that encourages similar policies in the private sector.

Speakers at today's hearing included gay police officers, lawyers and others who told of harassment in the workplace and lost job opportunities because of their homosexuality.

"Many people see 1977 as the beginning of the rise of the extreme right in this country, with a real focus on anti-gay rhetoric," said Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign. "This shows how far we've come toward basic fairness for gay Americans. This is a wonderful victory for Miami-Dade County, but it's a watershed victory for gays and lesbians nationally."

Two decades ago, though the former antidiscrimination law was repealed by voters by a margin of more than 2 to 1, the campaign also undermined the career of Ms. Bryant, who took her drive to other states. Ms. Bryant, who moved to Oklahoma soon after the law was repealed, lost entertainment engagements and was dropped as spokeswoman of the Florida Citrus Commission in orange juice advertisements. Efforts to reach Ms. Bryant by telephone were unsuccessful.

The issue remained dormant until last year, when a county commissioner introduced a gay rights bill, but it never reached the stage where it was considered at a public hearing or put to a final vote by the commission. Supporters regrouped in the last 18 months, and say they are prepared to fight a repeal effort.

"I really think we turned the corner today as a community," said Mayor Alex Penelas of Miami-Dade County, who had urged a yes vote. "We're much more progressive, tolerant and mature."

It is striking, however, that it took the ordinance 21 years to resurface in an area that encompasses cities like Miami Beach, where homosexuals are an integral part of the cultural life.

Gay rights advocates say other priorities, like the area's need to absorb wave after wave of immigrants, have put issues like gay rights on the back burner.

But for those like the Cuban-born Mr. Hazday, who has lived here for 25 years, the Anita Bryant campaign was etched in memory. He said he was a college freshman when "I saw the hatred and division Anita Bryant brought to our county."

"I promised myself," he said, "next time I would get involved."

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