

NOW is concentrating all of its efforts on passing the ERA

By GEORGIA DULLEA

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WASHINGTON — The National Organization for Women had its national convention here last weekend. When it adjourned yesterday morning, Colette Roberts flew home to Houston for a brief reunion with her husband and "to get my winter clothes."

After that, she explained, "I'm coming right back here to work for the ERA in the Washington office as I have been working for the past two months."

Mrs. Roberts is a 41-year-old homemaker and the mother of four. Like a number of women at this convention, the last before the deadline for ratification of the proposed equal-rights amendment expires, she had pledged to work without salary for a year for its passage. And, like the others, Mrs. Roberts insists she is not discouraged by talk that hope as well as time appears to be running out for the proposed amendment.

Only nine months remain before the rati-

fication deadline expires. Although 35 states have ratified the proposed amendment, three more must do so before next June 30 or it will die. Even some of its ardent supporters now concede that prospects for the proposed amendment are dim.

Nevertheless, for the first time in its 15-year history, the nation's largest women's organization focused an entire convention on a single issue. NOW leaders asked the 3,000 delegates gathered here to "change your life," as Mrs. Roberts is doing, by devoting all or part of their time to the organization's crucial "Countdown to Equality" campaign.

Rather than electing officers and passing resolutions, as it has in past years, the organization turned its full attention to the battle for passage of the proposed amendment, possible strategies and available ammunition.

Eleanor Smeal, president of the 150,000-member organization, unveiled some of the

ammunition at a news conference. It included the following:

✓ A \$15-million national advertising campaign, another first for NOW, with commercial television time to be bought on a market-by-market basis in the ratified as well as 15 unratified states.

✓ An "ERA Message Brigade," the goal of which is to enroll one million supporters who, upon receiving alerts that action is needed in unratified states, will send messages to key political leaders in those states.

✓ An expansion to other unratified states of the "ERA Missionary Project," now under way in Utah where volunteers are going door to door in an effort to secure support for the proposed amendment.

✓ An "ERA Impact Project Report" on the 16 states that have added equal-rights provisions to their constitutions, stating that court decisions and legislation stemming from the provisions have resulted in an ex-

pansion of rights of men as well as of women.

✓ A report on recent public-opinion polls that show a 15 percent gap between male and female voters in their approval of the Reagan administration's policies. While 64 percent of the men polled approve of the president's policies, women are now split, 49-49 percent, with 2 percent undecided. Moreover, the polls also show more women supporting the Democrats than the Republicans.

"This is not an insignificant 'woman problem' the Republicans and the administration are having," Mrs. Smeal said. "We believe people have gotten the message that there is a general rollback and cutback on programs that have their greatest impact on women."

Chief among them, she said, is "a general watering down" of affirmative-action programs and programs under Title IX, which

guarantees equal opportunity in education.

Mrs. Smeal conceded that NOW may be "taking a chance" in committing so much time, energy and money to the issue, but, she said: "We must take that chance because that is what women need. We're going to be out there fighting every day, every inch, giving everything we can give."

Calling President Reagan "our biggest membership recruiter," Mrs. Smeal said that NOW's membership had grown steadily and dramatically each month since he took office and that every day it was receiving more telephone calls from people pledging time and money to the cause.

"This response is because people know we are telling the truth, that women are cheated, that it's a ripoff," she said. "It's outrageous that today we have to be discussing equality under the law. It should have been our birthright and now we are at the deadline."

Death of an Amendment

By LINDA ROBERTSON

June 30, 1982 will probably come and go much like any other summer day. After double-checking their calendars, however, a significant number of men and women across the country will remember that June 30 was the deadline for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. What should have been a day of celebration will instead be a chance to mourn the demise of a beleaguered but noble idea.

ERA, comatose since the 35th state, Indiana, ratified in 1977, is fading fast. It will take a miracle to revive it by June 30.

Alice Paul, a leader in the women's suffrage movement, wrote the first version of ERA in 1923. The present 24-word statement was approved by the Senate in 1971 and the House in March of 1972. Forty-nine years after it was first introduced, the proposed 27th Amendment to the Constitution was sent to the states for ratification. The extension won three years ago runs out in just two months.

At first the victories came quickly and convincingly. State after state said yes to ERA. But something funny happened on the way to ratification. After Indiana approved it five years ago, the amendment stalled. And it has been sputtering ever since.

Why has such a simple proposal failed when poll after poll shows that the majority of Americans support equal rights? There are a number of reasons, not the least of which involves the diversionary tactics of those opposed to ERA. Opponents have raised the dreaded spectre of unisex bathrooms, totally ignoring the fact that not even ERA can violate the basic right of privacy. They have also painted vivid mental pictures of mutilated women bleeding on battlefields, victims of the amendment that drafted them into combat. Then there are the horror stories about moral decay, about an epidemic of lesbianism and abortions. Unfortunately, sensationalism works.

Almost everybody is for equal rights. But because its opponents have created a distorted image of ERA, many people hesitate to support the amendment backed by "radical feminists."

"ERA has nothing to do with bathrooms or our military security or how you treat women in a private or sexual way. It is as general and conceptual as the Constitution," said Betty Friedan, author and founder of the National Organization for Women, when she debated Phyllis Schlafly here last spring. "All men are created equal. What we now will be saying is that all persons are created equal. All the rest is nit-picking and trivialization."

Schlafly countered that ERA would create a "gender-free society" and would wrench the happy homemaker from the hearth into the work force. In one fell swoop, ERA would destroy the family and erode Americans' values.

ERA's failure also reflects the country's changing political mood and its swing to a conservative stance. Unlike his six predecessors, Ronald Reagan opposes ERA, although he insists he is for equal rights. Actually, the president has moved in the opposite direction.

Last summer Reagan pushed through Congress an economic package that eliminated benefits for recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Eighty percent of all AFDC recipients live in households headed by women. The Justice Department no longer uses numerical or statistical formulas in connection with affirmative action, which makes equal-employment goals for women and minorities meaningless. Reagan has also weakened the EEOC and Title IX. Only 44 of his 398 top-level appointments have gone to women and they hardly represent a step forward. Anne Gorsuch, head of the EPA, once tried to dismantle the Colorado state Commission on Women. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has often sided with Stanford classmate and ultra-conservative William Rehnquist.

Others argue that the amendment is unnecessary, that there are plenty of existing laws that deal with sex discrimination and provide adequate guarantees. But one fact still stands out: Women earn 59 cents to every dollar a man takes home.

ERA would be a solid, straightforward reference point in the battle against sex bias. In the words of Friedan, ERA is the "constitutional underpinning" needed for consistent enforcement. An explicit expression of congressional intent would also fortify the Supreme Court's power to rule on sex discrimination issues. In *Frontiero v. Richardson* (1973), Justices Brennan, Douglas, White and Marshall clearly supported the theory that gender is a suspect classification, thus affording women the same protection blacks receive under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In the absence of a constitutional guarantee of equality, the fragility of women's rights is ever present.

"I temporarily left my family in Texas last August to pour all my energy into ERA," said Colette Roberts, a board member of NOW. "I'm optimistic but very realistic. We're a few votes away everywhere. The majority of people clearly want ERA, but a few legislators are holding it up. It took the Civil War to get the 14th Amendment. People are terrified of change. But we're not twiddling our thumbs here. We've already formulated strategies for reintroducing the ERA."

Hopefully, ERA's failure to pass by June 30 will prove to be only a temporary setback. The women's movement is hardly dead. ERA is no panacea and was never meant to be. But its eventual passage would be symbolic of the emancipation of women from the home as a primary source of identity and the restructuring of the marketplace to meet the needs of both males and females.

"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

It's that simple.

Linda Robertson, a junior English and journalism major from Miami, Fla., is sports editor of The Daily Tar Heel.

NOW Reaffirms Priorities, to Resume Fight for ERA

By BEVERLY BEYETTE, *Times Staff Writer*

NEW ORLEANS—With the National Organization for Women a year shy of 20, the mood at the annual conference was perhaps best summed up by former Equal Employment Opportunity Commission head Eleanor Holmes Norton, who told delegates: "We are not what we were—and we are not what we can be."

The spirit at the weekend gathering was far different from a year ago in Miami Beach where NOW members, tasting real political power, greeted presidential hopefuls who had come to court them with chants of "Run With a Woman! Win With a Woman!"

First Woman Nominee

But the trouncing taken at the polls by Mondale-Ferraro—with Geraldine Ferraro, NOW's choice, as the first woman nominee for vice president—was being perceived here less as a defeat for the ticket than as a victory for women.

Ferraro, who was visiting China with her family, spoke to this meeting via videotape. With her candidacy, she said, feminism's 19-year dream of being "on the inside" in American politics had

come true. "NOW has helped open wonderful doors for women," she said. "With your help, I know we will go through them."

Ann Lewis, executive director of Americans for Democratic Action, noting that the male Establishment must have "breathed a sigh of relief" in November and told itself "we won't have *them* to kick around anymore," put it this way: "Well, that ain't true. It'll never get back to normal."

Lewis cautioned, however: "We have to be very firm on who we are and what we stand for."

Those priorities, reiterated at this conference, include abortion rights, passage of the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1985, which would restore prohibitions on sex discrimination at federally aided institutions, and gay and lesbian rights.

And Eleanor Smeal, the charismatic feminist who reclaimed the presidency of NOW as the Pied Piper who will lead women into the streets in massive marches and demonstrations, has another goal:

To resurrect the fight for an equal rights amendment, a cam-

NOW

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paingn that has been more or less in deep freeze since defeat of the ERA in June, 1982. The new campaign will begin with a drive for ratification of a model state referendum in 1986 in Vermont.

Smeal will take office Sept. 1, which means that for the next two years, at least, the days of low-key lobbying, the preferred tactic of outgoing president Judy Goldsmith, are over. In the closing session here, Smeal, a woman who says she is powered by "the fumes of feminism," served notice: "I intend to raise a little hell." She added: "I believe that America is holding its breath."

Right-Wing Enemy

NOW has met the enemy and has identified it as the right wing. Smeal did not hesitate to say that President Reagan's victory in November, and the nation's conservative climate, helped set the stage for her comeback as president of NOW, a job she held from 1977-1982.

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NOW: Fight Will Resume With Election of Smeal

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"(NOW) people are feeling real frustrated," said Nikki Heidepriem, a former Mondale-Ferraro staffer who came here in support of Goldsmith. "This may be a reflection of that kind of fury."

Lois DeBerry, a member of the Tennessee state legislature, cautioned that the ultra-right movement is "growing by leaps and bounds."

And Norton emphasized that that movement is no longer composed of "primitive sexists repeating beliefs of the ages, scattered conservatives bewildered by change." Rather, she said, "they have coalesced into a power block of reaction, led by an Administration that has put the government itself at their disposal."

Feminists are angry about a tax nationwide on abortion clinics and increased that the Supreme Court might overturn its 1973 decision legalizing abortion. Goldsmith had announced here a "Save Women's Lives" campaign, to climax in January with presentation in Washington of a pro-choice statement signed by 1 million Americans. Smeal says she will follow through, but has called for more aggressive action, including a massive march and rally in Washington in March. NOW is angry, too, about statutes in 25 states that, it says, discriminate against lesbian mothers in child-custody cases. And NOW is angry that public policy does not respond to the need of women in the work force for affordable and accessible quality child care.

It is angry about racism, angry about unequal opportunities for women in the hierarchies of major religious denominations and about the feminization of poverty.

And it is angry about pornography that depicts violence toward women, but for some time feminists have had trouble grappling with this issue because of reluctance to endorse any action that might smack of censorship. About 75 protesters, led by NOW's Andrea Dworkin, swept through the city's French Quarter, only a few blocks from the Convention Hotel, Saturday night. They waved "Say No to Porn" placards in the shadow of topless-bottomless clubs along Bourbon Street and, above the strains of jazz, shouted "1-2-3-4, Porn Out the Door."

In passing a resolution recognizing that the membership is "deeply divided" on whether pornography is harmful to women and whether laws against it would reduce violence against women, NOW made its strongest statement to date, allocating \$10,000 to explore solutions ranging from product labeling laws to better sex-education programs.

NOW is angry with Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority and angry at President Reagan for Administration policies that have cut back or eliminated social programs that benefited the poor and the disenfranchised, many of whom are women.

Not all of NOW's anger is directed at others. There is considerable disagreement within about whether the organization, with 250,000 members the nation's largest feminist group, is doing enough, and doing it right, to attract minority women.

Colette Roberts, a black woman who chairs NOW's Committee to Combat Racism, which was established in 1983, exploded at a minority caucus.

"I am strongly opposed to women of color being shuttled into one workshop and then we're not seen again, we're not supposed to be seen again."

There are no minority women among NOW's newly elected national officers. But Roberts did express her pleasure that there were "more women of color attending this conference than we have ever seen."

Do your homework, she urged—let minorities know NOW isn't just an all-white group absorbed in white women's issues.

Joyce Johnson, a black woman who is minority-right liaison at NOW national offices in Washington, said feminists should keep in mind that white women's issues and black women's issues in common include child-care programs, affirmative action and government funding for abortions.

Maria Saiz, a national board member from Miami, confronted Roberts angrily and said of Roberts' committee: "I don't think you all do a damn thing to help me or to help minorities in my region. I don't see you working on my issues. It's time we talked the truth."

"Racism is quite prevalent in our organization," another woman said. "We do not understand the issues in the black community. The black woman is also concerned about her man. A lot of white women don't understand that. They've got to deal with color first, then the issue of being women."

A Florida delegate said Cuban women "don't even know what NOW is" and NOW has nothing to offer them.

To a degree, the caucus had been

used as a political tool. It took place just before the election for president and those who spoke out were, for the most part, lined up philosophically either on the side of Smeal (more militancy) or Goldsmith (progress takes time).

At session's end, chair Roberts was in tears. "People in this organization do not have minority rights as a priority," she said. But, with establishment of the committee and, recently, tips on combatting racism sent to all chapters, "a lot of groundwork has been laid," Roberts said.

Roberts, a NOW member for 15 years, said, "black women come in and then they leave." She has stayed, she said, because "I do not think NOW is a racist organization and it's better to work from in here. The chapters do need to reach out but minority women need to investigate us and see what we're doing."

Divisiveness within is one thing NOW cannot afford as it presses its agenda and gears up for the 1986 congressional races.

A successful challenge to an incumbent president was unheard of. The closeness of the fight (a margin of 136 votes with 1,542 cast) and the passion with which it was fought, inevitably led to some bad feelings.

Still, there did not appear to be a major rift. Goldsmith took the first step toward unity, issuing this statement: "Ellie is a proven leader who, I know, will build a strong NOW and move us quickly toward equality."

If she was bitter that Smeal, the woman who had supported her as her successor when she herself was forbidden by bylaws to seek a third term, had come back to haunt her, she did not, for the most part, show it publicly.

Goldsmith was not defeated because the membership disliked her; they simply like Smeal and her give-'em-hell approach better.

"Judy is not bad," said Phyllis

CATHY



Wetherby, a delegate from Pennsylvania, Smeal's home state, "but the cool is maybe not quite so inspirational. Ellie's a fighter and once you've gone to battle with a general..."

"It's not what was wrong," said Don Cannon, a pro-Smeal delegate from Ventura. "Judy is certainly a very capable leader. But Smeal has a charisma style."

But Cannon does not see a lasting schism. "There's some hard feelings," he said, "but they'll stay in and fight."

Pro-Goldsmith delegate Patti Headland-Wauston of Anaheim, while lauding her candidate for "a great job," acknowledged: "I feel that Ellie will produce." A big question, she said, is whether Smeal can get people "ripped up" without the emotion of an ERA deadline campaign as she had during her presidency.

Susan Silberstein of Long Beach, NOW, who also supported Goldsmith, said: "I think a lot of people were remembering what was happening when Ellie was president (before), the excitement of the ERA campaign. Everyone was so charged up to end. Even though we lost it felt great." Perhaps, she said, these people "want to bring back those good feelings."

Heidepriem agreed. "A lot of women had their first experience with feminism with NOW, under Ellie," she suggested, there is residual longing for the good old days.

She added: "I don't think the call for less militancy" reflects how a lot of women in America feel, but NOW's never claimed to represent them all. Women who aren't

comfortable with that can go with another organization."

Carmen del Rio, a Baton Rouge, La., delegate wearing a "macho sico" button, said: "I respect both women highly but Ellie's a very exciting person and NOW could use that excitement right now, especially to appeal to younger women who are reaping the benefits of feminism, but have become quite complacent."

With either leader, she said, NOW would "continue and do," but "Ellie had a little more fire in the belly."

Goldsmith, gracious in defeat, entered the hall for the first time as lame-duck president to tumultuous cheers and chants. Working the crowd under a shower of confetti, she embraced her supporters, among them Sandra Farha, NOW's California coordinator.

At the podium, she smiled and said: "All that has really happened is that you have moved me to a premature action" on career planning.

Goldsmith has expressed interest in running for Congress from her home state of Wisconsin. In an interview here she said: "I'm very interested in the possibility of a feminist think tank. I love to write. And a part of me wants to go back to a nice quiet academic life." (She is a former English professor.)

She asked the members, "Be gentle and kind to each other." And she assured them: "none of us is going away. And we tend to be feisty types. . . . I do not intend to ever become a good loser. I don't like it and I will avoid it in the future."

Now, she said, "we've got our

work cut out for us so let's get back to it."

For 20 years, Eleanor Holmes Norton, now a professor of law at Georgetown University, said, "we have both failed and succeeded." Recognizing that "great movements must reinvent themselves," she said it is time for NOW to "reassess, rethink, reevaluate."

Not only have times changed, she said but "we ourselves have changed the times." Now, she said, it is important to remember that, while there are women in numbers in the professions and in management, "the great majority of women must still be classified as women have-nots." She spoke of two classes of working women, "an elite that progresses and a majority that is stymied" in low-pay service jobs.

Goldsmith in conversation pointed up another challenge to the feminist movement: "In the beginning you get rid of most of the disgusting, blatant forms of discrimination and then people say: 'What do you women want, anyhow?' What's left is much more difficult, the bedrock," such as comparable work pay and insurance company policies that don't discriminate against women.

Several speakers said that it is the feminists' durability that is being tested at this point in history. As delegates headed home, some elated, some disappointed, most re-energized, Nikki Heidepriem observed: "the women's movement in this country is too strong to be affected by what's happening in any one organization. This is a deep and abiding and serious movement."

by Cathy Guisewite

Carroll Righter Astrological Forecast

Aries (March 21 to April 19) Don't listen to what a home tie has to say about an outside partner. A situation arises that makes it important to keep promises.

Taurus (April 20 to May 20) Keep busy at regular duties and become more efficient at them, but do not argue with a partner.

Gemini (May 21 to June 21) Concentrate on pleasure that will not be too expensive and you can be just as happy.

Moon Children (June 22 to July 21) Important you take care of needs of kin and forget personal desires for the time being. Show you are a good host.

Leo (July 22 to Aug. 21) Don't permit a private worry to stop you from accomplishing a good deal in the world of activity. Listen to ideas of partners.

Virgo (Aug. 22 to Sept. 22) Don't permit one who has little to do to keep you from

If your child is born today he or she will easily have the feelings hurt and will lash out towards others, so early teach to be more objective, and then the life can become very successful. A perfectionist here at whatever is tackled. Provide good ethical training.

important business dealings. Forget personal aims for now.

Libra (Sept. 23 to Oct. 22) You are tempted to make comments that are unlike your cooperative self, so refrain from doing so.

Scorpio (Oct. 23 to Nov. 21) You may feel restricted in some way, but the fog soon lifts and you are your happy self again. Don't go off on tangents.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22 to Dec. 21) Steer clear of that business meet and spend as much time as you can with good and kind friends.

Capricorn (Dec. 22 to Jan. 20) Concentrate on handling worldly and public affairs well today and avoid an irritable partner. Settle credit matters.

Aquarius (Jan. 21 to Feb. 19) You have a brilliant idea that should be put in operation quickly, so don't waste time with the humdrum.

Pisces (Feb. 20 to March 20) Make your environment more charming and comfortable so that duties you perform will be easier in the future.

Training for Unemployed

The Career Planning Center is recruiting people who are receiving or who have exhausted unemployment insurance benefits for training as assistants to stock brokers. Information on the state-funded program is available at the center, (213) 273-6633.

"MY HOUSEKEEPER'S GREAT. WHEN I ASK HER TO WORK SHE IGNORES ME"

Thanks for giving your appliances the afternoon off.

"When it's hot out, my housekeeper gives my appliances the afternoon off. She even sets

my air conditioner thermostat at a higher temperature. Because if she didn't, Edison might have to build new power plants. That costs money. And that

could affect our bills.

"So why don't you join us. Give your appliances the afternoon off. Tonight I'm going to try my new curling iron."



Southern California Edison



Arkansas ACLU chief addresses NOW

LITTLE ROCK (AP) — Judges, from Supreme Court to municipal court, are the key to gaining equality for women, Sandra Kurjiaka, executive director of the Arkansas chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, told the National Organization for Women.

"Judges do not live in a vacuum," Ms. Kurjiaka told about 30 people at the meeting Saturday. "They have to go out in the world," she said, and they are influenced by what they see and hear.

"You have to hold these people accountable," she said of judges, adding that women must make their voices heard at the polls.

Reporters had been notified of the conference and invited to attend, but Ms. Kurjiaka later tried to put all of her remarks off the

record.

NOW, she said, needs to have a legislative agenda ready for consideration by lawmakers, because the organization called Family, Life, America and God already has worked out an agenda.

The number of "feminist" attorneys in Arkansas is growing, she said, in contrast to past years when she had only a few good feminist lawyers to recommend. It is important to use those attorneys whenever possible, she said, to help them stay in business.

"Being a woman is not enough, they have to be feminists, too," she said.

The group also heard Saturday from Colette Roberts, national chairperson for NOW Combat Racism. She criticized the Reagan

administration for allegedly worsening racial problems.

"Because of the Reagan administration, it's like now it's OK to be racist," she said.

Everyone, she said, "has racism within them. Nobody is color blind." The answer, she said, is to recognize prejudice and overcome it.

Ermon Vandy of Pine Bluff was elected president of the organization for the coming year. Other officers elected Saturday included Cherie Catlett of Little Rock, vice president of communications; Fran Soderberg of Little Rock, legislative vice president; Lynnah Selman of Little Rock, executive vice president; Donna Schwartz of Fayetteville, secretary; and Marcia Raeben McClain of Blytheville, treasurer.

Parents, friends of gays pro-family, too

Mike Littwin's column of Nov. 1, "If a gay gene causes homosexuality ..." is right on target. He says that if being gay is genetic, then bias against homosexuality would be nothing more than simple prejudice.

Well, whether it is ever proven conclusively that it is genetic or not, discrimination against one segment of American society is wrong.

Personal bias against a group of people is bad enough, but must legislative prohibitions be enacted? The religious right and other extreme conservatives are doing everything they can to make the lives of lesbians, gays and bisexual people unbearable.

The real issue is not biblical quotes or genetics, but whether American citizens can live without fear. Those of us who are parents and friends of lesbians and gay persons are pro-family in every way. We value our children and are committed to helping them secure their well-deserved full human and civil rights. Bigotry is un-American, and I salute Mike Littwin for acknowledging this.

Colette Roberts
Columbia

The writer is coordinator for PFLAG, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, in Howard County.

ON

Alternative prom planned for same-sex couples

Dance's 'Rainbow' theme to represent inclusiveness

By ERIKA NIEDOWSKI
AND ALICE LUKENS
SUN STAFF

Gay and lesbian high school students in Howard County will be singing and dancing "Under the Rainbow" next month in Columbia at the first same-sex prom held in the county.

The alternative prom is being sponsored by the Howard chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), a national nonprofit organization.

"It's really positive for the kids to know that there's a place that they can go to and have fun like they would at [their high school] prom," said Dorina Stanislaw, 18, a Centennial High School senior from Ellicott City who plans to attend the event with her girlfriend, Jennifer Roorda, 20, a 1997 Centennial graduate.

The prom's theme, "Under the Rainbow," was chosen because the rainbow is widely recognized as a symbol of gay pride.

Schools not involved

Patti Caplan, spokeswoman for the county school administration, said the May 8 prom is not associated with the school system, and that same-sex couples are welcome to attend any high school's prom.

"I hope people wouldn't infer that our proms are in any way exclusive, because they are not," said Caplan. "We have a human relations policy that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation."

Holly, 18, a Centennial senior who asked that her last name not be used, said the nondiscrimination policy doesn't ensure that students will be sympathetic when they see same-sex couples slow-dancing or holding hands.

"It's still very hard, just be-

cause the schools can't really monitor other students and their reactions," said Holly, who is taking her girlfriend, Amy, a Mount Hebron senior, to Centennial's prom. "So there is a definite need for it, because not everyone feels comfortable going to their high school prom."

Colette Roberts, co-chairwoman of PFLAG's local chapter, said the semiformal event at the Sheraton Columbia is being funded primarily through private donations but that the nonprofit group is also using a portion of a Health Department grant.

The grant money is being used for HIV/AIDS awareness and self-esteem programs.

PTA and school board members reached yesterday said they support the event.

"I don't want any child to feel left out," said Sandra H. French, a member of the school board.

Barb Langridge, president of the PTSA at Centennial, said everyone should have a chance to "be who they are."

"And if that's who you are, then you should have a chance to celebrate that, and I think that's fine."

Fun, not just a statement

The PFLAG prom is being held less to make a political statement than to give gay students a chance to enjoy an evening out where they feel safe and accepted.

The event is open to college students and members of other area gay-support groups, including Sufficient As I Am of Baltimore and Sexual Minority Action League of Washington.

Students can buy tickets, which are \$15, at Columbia Association headquarters and Lambda Rising bookstores.

About 100 tickets have been sold.

Roberts said she hopes the prom will help some students be more open about their sexuality.

"Just the thought of having to live in hiding has got to be very painful for people," she said.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

River Hill kiss: Many missed the point

As one of the two instigators of the recent gay-rights controversy at River Hill High School in Clarksville, Maryland, I feel the need to debunk some rumors and media fabrications I have heard regarding the motives behind the tabletop kiss and the nature of the disciplinary action against us. Most importantly, I want to ensure that the underlying message that Stephanie Haaser and I sought to communicate does not get lost in the sensational nature of the act itself.

The idea for our little demonstration came about when Stephanie was assigned an English project on nonconformity. While most of her classmates opted for minor, inoffensive deviations, Steffi asked me to help her stage a Thoreau-esque act of civil disobedience to protest the rampant homophobia here at River Hill. Both of us have gay friends, many of whom are afraid to come out because of the inevitable hostility and harassment leveled at those who express alternative sexual orientations. As anyone might conclude from the cruel slurs thrown about in the hallways and the casual use of "gay" in the derogatory, homosexuals are not welcome here.

Thus the kiss in the cafeteria stemmed entirely from our desire to support the gay community and to encourage those still in the closet to come forth.

Contrary to popular opinion, it was neither a cheap ploy for attention a 'la Britney and Madonna (as Fox 45 News seemed to suggest), nor was it an act of affection. The fact that Stephanie and I are both heterosexual, in tandem with the act itself, demonstrates our deep commitment to an issue that does not directly affect us but permeates the social environment around us.

Sexual orientation seems to be the last unconquered frontier of discrimination, the one remaining area in which hatred toward a minority typically goes unchallenged. Most disturbing to me is the fact that the River Hill faculty typically turn a blind eye to this form of prejudice, thus implying that it is somehow more acceptable than, say, racism. It is not. I have no doubt that any student heard uttering the notorious "n-word" in reference to a black person would face severe consequences, and rightfully so. Why then, do we condone the use of the "f-word" in reference to gays? I find it ironic that we were suspended for "disrupting" the functioning of the school by "creating a scene" in the lunchroom (which is plenty rambunctious to begin with), while students yelling "faggot" in class or in the hallways apparently do not constitute enough of a threat to a safe and inclusive learning environment to warrant any sort of reprimand at all.

Students and administration alike were shocked by the events of Nov. 5, as Stephanie and I intended them to be. The two-day suspension we received as a result of our "performance" was no great hardship for either of



DAVID HOBBY : SUN STAFF
Anna Boyland (left) and Mia Freyer of River Hill High School protest after two female students who kissed as part of a class requirement to perform a nonconformist act were suspended.

us; it is nothing compared to the alienation and ostracization experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students everywhere. Yet the media has consistently and wrongly focused on our punishment as the central injustice here, when what really needs addressing is the broader issue of discrimination in the school community.

Many of the news reports featuring the River Hill kiss controversy, with the possible exception of *The Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*, have done little justice to our cause. Continuing to allow ourselves to be exploited in the public eye as a couple of sexy "lesbos" will accomplish nothing. On the contrary, it will most likely garner resentment and disgust from the very people we are trying to enlighten.

So while I hope that the media hype will die down shortly, I will continue to fight for this cause on behalf of the gay community. My friends and I are taking steps to organize another peaceful protest, write letters to newspapers and spread the message of tolerance. It would be naive to suggest that this prejudice will ever be fully eradicated, or that our close-minded detractors can all be won over. But I sincerely hope that a few years down the line, people will look back on this controversial same-sex kiss as the radical but necessary kick-start of a more prolonged, deliberative movement to bring about change.

Katherine Pecore
Clarksville

River Hill High School Class of 2004

Schools must deal with homophobia

I want to thank all the students at River Hill High School who spoke out and demonstrated against homophobia. If this issue is not addressed in our schools, we send a message to every student — gay or straight — that gay people are not first-class citizens. We do this with no other group, and as long as the Howard County school system considers this topic "too controversial" to deal with, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students stay cowering in the closet.

School must be a safe place

for all students.

Ms. Haaser and Ms. Pecore were courageous by simply following an English class assignment — do something non-conformist. As a parent I encourage all students to obey school rules, but schools need to differentiate between rowdy behavior and a creative approach to a school project. The young women used this opportunity to showcase a serious problem all Howard County schools have — a lack of support and intervention for harassment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students.

I applaud these brave students for making the effort to change the climate at River Hill High School. What is disturbing is the harsh punishment (two days suspension and being removed from the National Honor Society). I hope this does not dissuade other students from voicing their opinions. These young women are outstanding students and used their right of free speech on this critically important issue.

It is my wish that River Hill High School will listen to their voices and take a leadership position by creating an environment that is supportive of all its students.

Colette Roberts
Columbia

Chair Howard County PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

Explaining discomfort of Jewish community

In regard to the reported comments of Barry Rubin, who characterized concerns by Howard County Jewish leaders over his missionary activities as "antiquated" and "not necessary," let me present some additional facts that may help explain some of the discomfort of the Jewish community toward his enterprise ("Raising a question of faith" Nov. 16).

Of the three corporate organizations presently committed to the planned interfaith center project, two of them are directed by Mr. Rubin and only one of these two is a congregational entity. His Emmanuel Messianic Jewish Congregation is an adaptation of the original Emmanuel Presbyterian Hebrew Christian Congregation. The Lederer

Foundation, the publishing concern which Mr. Rubin also runs, is the continuation of a much earlier missionary project run by the Salem Hebrew Lutheran Mission.

Like most "Messianic Jewish" leaders, Mr. Rubin himself is a veteran missionary who has been involved for many years with several other Evangelical Christian organizations that specialize in targeting Jews for conversion. In a March 2002 paper submitted by Mr. Rubin to the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE) he writes: "The LCJE analysis are useful as we consider how to have more effective evangelism through cooperation between missions and Messianic congregations."

"My awareness of the benefit of congregations increased when I was asked to serve as leader of what was then Emmanuel Presbyterian Hebrew-Christian Congregation. ... I became convinced that evangelists work can and does occur through Messianic congregations."

Mr. Rubin's present plans are contrary to recent trends throughout the larger Protestant and Catholic denominations that repudiate proselytism directed specifically towards members of the Jewish faith. His continued attempts to insinuate his evangelistic enterprise into the fabric of the local interfaith community should be met with the condemnation which it deserves.

Len Rabenovets
Columbia

School board, too, needs democracy

Is the personal comfort of incumbent Board of Education members more important than the right of Howard County voters to elect those persons who would represent them on that board? You would think so if you listened to the testimony of board member Courtney Watson, speaking for the Board, in opposition to the proposed bill that would let the voters of the county choose their own representative on that board if a vacancy occurred early in a four-year term ("School board issues heard by legislators," Nov. 20). I was there at the hearing to speak, on behalf of the Columbia Democratic Club, in support of the bill. Fortunately, I was not

Teen honored for stance against homophobia

Howard Co. student will receive award from PFLAG

By TRICIA BISHOP
SUN STAFF

Stephanie Haaser, a 16-year-old junior at River Hill High School in Clarksville, stood on a cafeteria table last month and shouted "End homophobia now!" before bussing her friend Katherine Pecore, a 17-year-old senior.

The demonstration focused a media spotlight on the Howard County school and on intolerance toward gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender teen-agers. Haaser, a heterosexual, became an instant celebrity, appearing on talk shows and in hundreds of newspapers. Her photo was at one point the fifth-most popular picture downloaded from the Yahoo news Web site, and her name recently returned 869 Internet hits on the search engine Google. She received letters and calls from people as far away as New Zealand.

On Thursday, she will be honored with a "Hope for the Future Award" in Washington during a ceremony held by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a 30-year-old outreach group promoting equality. She is also being named a student adviser to a scholarship program that PFLAG will unveil in January.

"I'm surprised at the amount of influence that I've been able to have. It's more than I ever hoped for," said Haaser.

She said she thinks the situation at her school has improved in recent weeks. She has heard students correct themselves after tossing out a slur and hasn't heard a single "derogatory term used against homosexuals" since the story about the kiss broke Nov. 12.



Stephanie Haaser, 16, gained international fame when she was disciplined for kissing a girl.

"It's hard to say why," she said, acknowledging that people might be careful around her because of her "strong views."

But some say the verbal abuse has gotten worse at the school since Haaser's gesture.

"I hear more stuff every day," said Courtney Teed, a 14-year-old freshman and a member of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance after-school club, along with her stepbrother, Jeff Taylor. Taylor, who is keeping count, said he heard 60 slurs in four days last week.

"That's kind of the reason why I joined [the Gay-Straight Alliance]," Taylor said, sitting with friends at a Clarksville restaurant last week. "It just [angered me] so much that people could be this hurtful."

The school is working toward improvement, officials say. Last week, the chairwoman of Howard County PFLAG, Colette Roberts, met with Principal Scott Pfeifer to discuss ways River Hill could improve its climate. And members of the Gay-

"It just [angered me] so much that people could be this hurtful."

Jeff Taylor of River Hill High's Gay-Straight Alliance

Straight Alliance plan to give a presentation to faculty members next month.

Maryland law protects students from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Still, prejudice is not just a problem for River Hill or the state. It is a national crisis, according to results of a survey released this month by the National Mental Health Association, which has launched an anti-bullying program called "What Does Gay Mean?" The program is aimed at developing respect.

The study found that three-quarters of teen-agers say students who are gay, or perceived to be gay, are teased or bullied, while 93 percent of students hear homosexual slurs at school; 51 percent of them say they hear the terms daily.

Constant bullying, the researchers concluded, puts gay students at "increased risk for depression, anxiety disorders, school failure and often suicide."

But there are many supporters out there as well, said Teed, who is a lesbian.

"I used to be afraid to tell people, afraid girls would be afraid to talk to me. But a lot of people are accepting," she said.

But, she added, the picture is different for gay males, who seem to attract the brunt of criticism.

Alex Plaxen agreed. The 17-year-old River Hill senior wants to be treated like everyone else, but he said he often is not because he is gay.

He said he has been told to

get AIDS and die; to go home because he doesn't belong; and that certain people would not sit next to him if they knew he is homosexual.

"That hurt a lot. I'm no different than anyone else," Plaxen said. "I went home and cried that day."

The people harassing others might be few but vocal, according to the Mental Health Association survey. Just 4 percent of teen respondents acknowledged bullying or finding it funny, while 78 percent said they reject that behavior, which can sometimes turn violent.

Popular culture — at least on television shows such as *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* — seems to be embracing sexual diversity to a certain degree, giving some small hope.

"I think they all add to demystifying the lives of [gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender] persons and their families — even *Queer Eye*, though I have mixed feelings about some of the story lines that are developed," said David Tseng, executive director of the national PFLAG organization, based in Washington. "It has helped to humanize the way in which [such] persons interact with others."

Haaser's stand also has contributed, Tseng said, by pioneering "a national public discussion of the role of straight young men and women in the fight for equality."

Roberts, of Howard County PFLAG, said her teacher friends are using Haaser's story as a discussion topic in classes. In Anne Arundel County, at least one Gay-Straight Alliance group has seen a rise in membership because of the action taken by Haaser and the publicity that followed.

In Indiana, a 15-year-old straight boy has been inspired



CHIAKI KAWAJIRI : SUN STAFF

River Hill High School junior Mia Freyer (left) and freshman Courtney Teed are disturbed by the verbal abuse they hear in school. "I hear more stuff every day," Teed said.



CHIAKI KAWAJIRI : SUN STAFF

Senior Alex Plaxen (left) says he has been verbally harassed at school for being gay. Jeff Taylor, a freshman at River Hill, overheard 60 slurs in school over four days last week.

to speak up.

"I want to help educate people," said Eli Van Sickle, who lives in Terre Haute.

The biggest thing people need to learn, said Plaxen and Teed, is that they are just kids, like everyone else. The only thing separating them, they say, is their romantic preference and the treat-

ment they sometimes receive because of it.

"It puts more weight on your shoulders," Plaxen said. "In one aspect, you're expected to be proud of who you are. On the other hand, you just want to be like everyone else. You just want to be the same, and yet you're so different."

As co-founder of a group for parents of gays and lesbians, Colette Roberts has become a support group and activist rolled into one



Colette Roberts, who is shown at her home in Columbia, says, "I've always been a person that believes we can make changes in this society."

DAVID HOBBY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Making tolerant parents proud

BY SANDY ALEXANDER
[SUN REPORTER]

Colette Roberts likes to tell people that having four teenagers in the house at one time gave her plenty of reasons to get upset, but her daughter being a lesbian was not one of them.

It is a story — and a pragmatic attitude — that comes in handy as Roberts tries to offer comfort and perspective to parents and family members who seek help from the Howard County chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, which she co-founded.

For 10 years, Roberts has been the one at

the other end of the phone when people call PFLAG: parents who are conflicted over a child coming out, family members who want to support a loved one, adults and youth who need guidance on how to tell people that they are homosexual.

"I wanted to just be there for people, be an example," Roberts said. "It is OK to love and cherish and be proud and support your gay child."

Roberts and her chapter were honored last month by Equality Maryland, a statewide civil rights organization for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

"When she started [the chapter], it was what a lot of chapters are, which is a sup-

port vehicle for parents," said Dan Furmansky, executive director of Equality Maryland. "But she's really transformed it. It's become a model for chapters across the country."

In addition to meetings during which individuals can hear each other's stories, the chapter has speakers, programs and social events. The leaders have started a separate group for parents who are more comfortable in a smaller setting. And recently, the chapter's youth group and advocacy arm have grown.

A trim, outgoing grandmother of seven, Roberts, 66, and her husband, Jim, moved several places for Jim's job as a shopping center manager for the Rouse Co. The fam-

ily spent time in Columbia when the children were young, and then Colette and Jim returned after he retired.

Now, in addition to her work with PFLAG, the Lake Elkhorn Waterfowl Committee and several other community groups, Colette produces artwork for the family Elliott City calligraphy shop, Oh My Word.

Roberts said she was not concerned when her daughter revealed she was lesbian more than a decade ago, because she had already suspected, and because she knew other lesbian women.

After a few meetings at another PFLAG chapter, Roberts said she did not feel as though she needed the support. But lead-
[Please see ROBERTS, 20G]

FROM THE COVER

Mom supports parents, youth of gay community

ROBERTS [From Page 1G]

ers — including the president of the national PFLAG organization — told her that other parents needed her.

Roberts and a neighbor, Linda Linton, founded the Howard County chapter of PFLAG in 1995.

The main meetings are a chance for parents, friends and family members to get together and share their experiences, a process that Roberts said is very important.

“Parents can lose their fears about ‘what will happen to my child,’” she said. They can see gay couples who have lasting relationships, full lives and children.

The group for gay and lesbian teens began about five years ago. Led by two facilitators, the group hosts meetings, social events and trips.

A lot more young people are coming out now than they did 10 years ago, Roberts said. The youth group is intended to be a safe place for them to make friends and have fun while being open about their homosexuality.

Dan McCarthy, a PFLAG board member and father of a gay son, said the youth group “was a god-send for us.” When his son Stephen — now a college student — was still finding his way among his peers, “it really enabled him to be who he is and to be himself,” McCarthy said.

The advocacy arm of the How-



Colette Roberts, co-founder of the Howard County chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, was recently honored for her work with the group.

DAVID HOBBY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

ard County PFLAG has also grown.

Roberts “has really put together a very powerful group,” McCarthy said. “She has made PFLAG much more than just a parents group. ... For me, it’s gone from accepting to celebrating to advocating. Now I’m out there fighting for my

son’s rights.”

PFLAG members have been developing relationships with elected officials and speaking out on civil rights issues for homosexuals. The chapter took about 90 people to a rally in Annapolis in February to speak out in favor of marriage for gays and lesbians.

The Howard PFLAG group also has worked with the county government, the Columbia Association and the school system on issues such as benefits for domestic partners and anti-bullying policies.

The political arena is one that comes naturally to Roberts.

COLETTE ROBERTS
“IT IS OK TO LOVE AND CHERISH AND BE PROUD AND SUPPORT YOUR GAY CHILD.”

As a self-described woman of color in an interracial marriage, she said she faced discrimination directly. In 1958, when she and Jim wed, “We could not have lived in Maryland,” she said.

Now, she said, the same arguments used against her are being used to deny her daughter the right to be married.

“She is singled out to be a second-class citizen,” Roberts said. “I don’t see why people are so threatened. ... I don’t understand why people want to deny them benefits.”

Roberts, who was moved to join the anti-Vietnam War movement and worked for abortion-rights causes and the Equal Rights Amendment, said, “I’ve always been a person that believes we can make changes in this society.”

Now, her group is telling other parents how they can get their message out.

“We can show the public this is who we are ... we’re families who

love our kids, who love our siblings, who love our co-workers who are lesbian and gay.”

Over the past decade, Roberts said she has seen a change in the culture.

She used to get many phone calls from parents traumatized by their child coming out, she said. “Now it’s like a whole total other world.”

With more gays in the media, more people are accepting and familiar with the issue, she said. More calls now are from people calmly seeking information or a way to get involved.

And, she said, she wants to encourage families to go even further.

“I want parents to go beyond acceptance to being proud,” she said.

McCarthy recalled seeing one woman rush up to Roberts at a gay pride parade, hug her and tell her, “You saved my life.”

Such a reaction “is like an everyday occurrence,” he said. “Who knows how many lives she’s helped.”

Said Furmansky: “I think she’s kind of gone from being the mother of a lesbian daughter to really being a mother for an entire community of people.”

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15 years heading PFLAG

Roberts to leave group she helped to found

Colette Roberts, the Columbia resident who co-founded and led the Howard County chapter of PFLAG, or Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, for the past 15 years, is stepping down Jan. 1, she said.

"It just felt right for me to move on. I had real mixed emotions," she said about leaving the 300-member group that includes members from around the metropolitan area. She said she felt that it was time for a new leader and that the group's members are very active, giving her confidence.



Roberts

"I've got an awesome board of directors. Everybody pitches in and jumps in," she said.

Pat English, 53, of Gwynn Oak in Baltimore County, a nine-year member and the current membership chair, will take over the top post, though the prospect is daunting, she said.

"It's a little unnerving at times. It's a great organization," she said. Her goal is to increase membership and "get more people of color involved."

Roberts built the group as both a resource and advocate for families with a lesbian or gay member, helping to solve personal crises, while pressing county government for policy changes to help end discrimination against gay and lesbian citizens. The group sponsors a candidate's forum before each election to spotlight gay and lesbian issues and get commitments from candidates.

—Larry Carson



PFLAG, education board gather to discuss bullying in county schools

More than a dozen members of the Columbia/Howard County Chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays met with the Howard County Board of Education Nov. 18, on the subject of bullying in schools.

The chapter members presented personal stories of the effects of bullying, survey data and recommendations to the board in an effort to help shore up anti-bullying policies and include transgender students in the guidelines.

Pictured in the back row, from left, is Dan McCarthy, Bob Ford, Perryn Morris and Patricia Morris English, Sue Garner, June Horner, Heath Goisovich and Colette Roberts; and in the front row, from left, is Nancy McCarthy, Catherine Hyde and Will Hyde.

*Send in your **BESTSHOT** to the Howard County Times/Columbia Flier, 10750 Little Patuxent Pkwy., Columbia, MD 21044 or e-mail to yourbestshot@patuxent.com. Please make sure all photos are clear and in color. All those who are clearly visible in the photograph must be identified. Either prints or digital photos can be submitted. Digital images should be 8"x10". Color copies or scans are not acceptable.*