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LOCAL

Meeting focuses on allies

By John Wright Staff Writer

Mar 29, 2007, 20:10

Minister, lawyer, school official and Atticus Circle director lead first in proposed series of meetings

If the LGBT community is ever to gain equal rights, it will need more straight allies.

That was the reasoning behind the first in what is expected to be an ongoing series of town-hall meetings Wednesday, March 28, at the Greenhill School in Addison.

The event, sponsored by PFLAG and the Human Rights Campaign, featured four panelists who spoke on a broad range of LGBT rights issues, from gay marriage to discrimination in schools to estate planning.

Gretchen Hamm of Dallas, one of about 100 who attended the event, said afterward she believes developing straight allies is critical because a large number of heterosexuals simply aren't aware of the inequalities the LGBT community faces.

"If they really understood, I would say the majority would vote with the LGBT community for equal rights," said Hamm, a PFLAG member who is straight but has a lesbian daughter.

The four panelists were Jodie Eldridge, executive director of Austin-based Atticus Circle; the Rev. Jimmy Creech, executive director of Raleigh, N.C.-based Faith in America Inc.; Kristine Vowels, an educator and administrator for the Dallas Independent School District; and Norman Lofgren, an attorney with Looper, Reed & McGraw who also teaches at Southern Methodist University.

Eldridge said Atticus Circle, a straight group dedicated to advancing LGBT rights, was named for Atticus Finch, the justice-seeking attorney from "To Kill A Mockingbird." "Circle" was added to represent the ever-expanding group of people who have the right to pursue happiness, she said.

"The last group of people who aren't included in that circle are LGBT parents and their children," Eldridge said.

Creech said Faith In America is dedicated to ending religion-based bigotry.

Creech had been a longtime minister in the United Methodist Church when a member of his congregation came out to him, prompting him to do some research.

Creech said he determined the Bible was being used to justify discrimination against gays in the same way it was used to justify slavery and inequality for women.

"I came to the conclusion that there is no reference to homosexuality in the Bible and there is no condemnation of same-gender-loving relationships," he said. "As a pastor, I felt compelled to begin to challenge my church."

Fifteen years later, the church responded by revoking his credentials of ordination, Creech said.

Vowels talked about her experiences establishing a committee, the LGBTAQ Educational Coalition, to combat discrimination within DISD. One of the goals of the committee is to establish chapters of the Gay Straight



Participating in the Town Hall Meeting on the importance of straight allies were, from left, attorney Norman Lofgren, DISD administrator Kristine Vowels, the Rev. Jimmy Creech and Atticus Circle Executive Director Jodie Eldridge. (Photo by JOHN WRIGHT/Dallas Voice)

Alliance — the number of which in DISD currently can be counted on one hand — in every DISD middle and high school.

“I had no idea what I was embarking on,” Vowels said. “The overall battle in my school district is something I never expected.”

Lofgren talked about legal issues affecting the LGBT community, including guardianship and wills. He encouraged members of the LGBT community to plan ahead, otherwise the government can end up determining what happens to their children, assets and remains.

“The word to the wise is protect yourself,” Lofgren said.

HRC steering committee member Gregory Pynes said he thought the town hall was a success.

“Hopefully in the coming months there will be other opportunities to come together and have another discussion like we did tonight,” he said.

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This article appeared in the Dallas Voice print edition March 30, 2007

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