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A call to be absent

Activists urge gays to skip work to push for same-sex rights

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Thousands of gay people vowed to skip work today to volunteer in their communities in a show of numbers aimed against anti-gay laws like Proposition 8, last month's California referendum banning same-sex marriage.

Organizers of a Day Without a Gay are encouraging gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and straight supporters to "call in gay" to show the impact the gay community has on society.

The "gaycott" was inspired by a series of nationwide protests on May 1, 2006 termed the "Day Without an Immigrant," when millions of foreign-born residents and their supporters called in sick to work and abstained from making purchases to demonstrate the extent to which they support the American economy.

Though the Day Without an Immigrant succeeded in producing nationwide publicity for immigrants' rights, Hetherington said he personally witnessed several of his coworkers lose their jobs for skipping work that day. His website stresses that people should not feel pressure to take off work or stay away from school if they think they may face retribution for it.

"We want to create an awareness of gay people in America who are compassionate and loving people," he said. "For us to economically punish 100 percent of America for a mistake 52.3 percent of Californians made on Nov. 4 is ridiculous."

Hetherington and his boyfriend, Aaron Hartzler, plan to spend the day volunteering at an inner-city school. Hetherington, a personal trainer, will teach gym classes, and Hartzler, a graphic designer, will teach art classes.

"We chose an inner-city school because often the people who vote against gay rights don't really know gay people," Hetherington said. "We'll show children and their parents that they don't have anything to be scared of."

Atticus Circle, a national nonprofit that seeks to educate straight people on LGBT rights, features

a template letter on its website that those who cannot take off work can use to write their congressional representatives. The letter writing campaign has seen increased interest as Day Without a Gay neared, Atticus Circle Executive Director Jodie Eldridge said in an email.

“There are hundreds of thousands of potential straight allies in the United States who simply do not know about or don’t have the opportunity to speak out about LGBT issues,” she said.

College students should volunteer in their communities to commemorate the day, Eldridge said. However, the economic boycott and philanthropy work are equally important.

“It’s time America understands just how much our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender friends contribute to our society,” she said. Day Without A Gay will bring awareness to how much LGBTs matter in our society and bring about the changes that are needed in our communities and future.”

MassEquality spokeswoman Melissa Threadgill said the state’s grassroots coalition of organizations defending gay marriage will offer volunteer opportunities all day Wednesday. Volunteering and being active is better than staying stuck on a couch, she said.

“It is an important message that is not enough to just take the day off,” she said. “Get out there and do good. There is always work to do.”

Spectrum, Boston University’s LGBT campus group, does not have any specific plans for Day Without a Gay, spokesman Anthony Simone said, though Simone said he personally plans to join in the economic boycott with several friends.

“It will show people how much we contribute,” Simone said. “We are united and should be equal.”

The Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary is encouraging mass rallies on Day Without a Gay, in hopes of uniting minority activists with the gay community to build a new inclusive civil rights movement, BAMN representative Ronald Brub said.

“Uniting the movements is crucial to winning them,” Brub, a University of California Berkeley law student, said. “We want to put ourselves forward as against discrimination, so students are not denied the opportunity of equal rights in any way.”