

Speaking Out

Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders

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GLAD, a legal defense fund serving the gay community of New England, was established in the early fall of 1978. The need for a legal organization had long been felt within the gay community, a community particularly vulnerable to legal attack. Too often lesbian women and gay men have failed to contest cases of discrimination, physical abuse, police entrapment, the denial of child custody, and other forms of harassment. It has been the feeling of alienation from this system that has assured our silence. The "emotional blackmail," that is a result of contesting any of the above forms of legal harassment, is often more expensive than the high cost of legal appeals. The ensuing publicity, possible loss of jobs, housing, and family supports has only reinforced our community's fears. Add to this the difficulty of locating lawyers sympathetic and familiar with the legal problems of gay people, and the attempt to take any legal action in a straight judicial system becomes a devastating project for any gay man or woman. Official awareness of the vulnerability of our community has enabled police and district attorneys to victimize gay people with little fear of legal challenge.

The need for an organization such as GLAD has grown with the development of a politically active gay community. The increasing number of anti-gay attacks have more and more frequently taken the form of legal harassment directed against the most political and the most vulnerable members of the community, those whose lifestyles and views are furthest from the norm. This has been evidenced both locally and nationally, in the sensationalized Revere indictments, in the mass arrests at the Boston Public Library and the South Station Cinema, in cases denying lesbian mothers custody of their children, in the raid on the *Body Politic* in Montreal, and the blasphemy trial of the *Gay News* in London. Together these attacks constitute a serious threat to the survival of an organized gay community. Creating a debilitating atmosphere of fear and fragmenting the precarious unity existing between the diverse elements that comprise our community, these attacks drain our energy and finances from other more positive tasks. It was felt that a legal organization, by encouraging gay people to defend themselves in court as gay people, would provide a major educational tool within our community, in straight society, and in the legal system itself.

In light of these attacks and the experiences of our community in resisting them, it was felt that the past practice of responding to cases and crises; individually, after the fact, was inadequate, and that a permanent "Legal Defense Fund" was essential to protect the community; both its individual members and its organizations, from future attack. It was also decided that GLAD should engage in litigation immediately, while at the same time undergoing a major fundraising campaign.

For purposes of incorporation, GLAD is governed by a Board of Directors whose members serve terms of one year. The Board is comprised of activists from various segments of the gay community and people whose primary activity is in the legal arena. The founding meeting of GLAD was open to the community and the Board remains open. We have sought as much diversity as possible in the composition of the Board.

Decisions as to what type of litigation is to be handled, as well as which specific cases will be taken on, are made collectively by the members of the Board, as are all policy deci-

sions. Day-to-day administrative work is handled by attorney John Ward (who serves in this role without compensation).

Our constituency is the entire lesbian and gay community, but particularly those who are involved with the criminal "justice system." Legal attacks against the gay community are often directed at the most vulnerable members: those whose lifestyles are furthest from the societal norm, those who are most closeted, and those who are most political. We see a need to resist attempts to chip apart our community by creating and emphasizing divisions; we see GLAD as representing the diverse interests of a diverse community. GLAD's membership includes men and women, gay and straight, who have a demonstrated record of concern and advocacy for the rights of lesbians and gay men.

The goals of GLAD are to provide basic protection of the civil liberties of lesbians and gay men, to provide a coordinated mechanism for strong political defense in gay-related cases, and to prevent homophobia from replacing justice. We hope to prevent abuses of justice as it is available through the legal system, while at the same time backing this up with education and organizing within the community to create pressure and action for more basic change.

Historically, gay people have often been especially victimized by the abuses inherent in the legal system. Gay people have accepted the treatment dealt out to us by police and courts because of the fear of greater risk in challenging it. GLAD will provide support for lesbians and gay men to fight back against the legal system: by providing legal and technical assistance, by demonstrating the possibility of effective resistance, and by educating and consciousness-raising within the whole community. In the long run we also hope the public resistance of gay people will discourage some of the more blatant harassment now commonplace in the legal system.

We are engaged in a fundraising appeal to the lesbian and gay community. Originally, we received several contributions from individuals and organizations; specifically the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Boston and the Boston/Boise Committee. These donations have enabled us to function so far and to begin to take on litigation.

Our present fundraising and educational campaign is directed at a large number of organizations and individuals, particularly those in the gay community. This effort includes direct mail appeals, speaking engagements, personal contacts and media coverage.

The initial response has been positive; yet the development of a working relationship with our community is a process that requires time. We are becoming better known in the community as a resource for gay individuals and organizations. Limited funds have given us the ability to handle only those cases that fit our budget, with increased financial support we would be able to address the broader issues of basic human rights for all gay men and lesbian women, within a straight judicial system. With increased recognition and credibility for our work, we expect financial support from gay organizations to increase. With the expansion of both our caseload and reputation, we intend to seek additional funds outside of the gay community.