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Coming to terms with gay issues

Region leans toward tolerance, not acceptance

By John Johnston and Ken Alltucker
Enquirer staff writers

Jack Harrison had just become the first openly gay man to be named a partner at one of Cincinnati's largest law firms.

Buoyed by a career on the upswing, he walked through Hyde Park Square on a Friday afternoon with his male companion, both in business suits, as any two professional men might.

Then a carload of teens drove by. And the name-calling began.

"Fags!" the kids yelled, shattering the peace. Harrison reacted with "anger, fear and disgust."

The incident in one of the city's most genteel neighborhoods illustrates the region's split personality when it comes to gay men and women.

In interviews and surveys, many gays in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky say they can live, work and raise children as well as their heterosexual neighbors. Yet many others feel out of place and out of sorts in a region that ranks 46th lowest of the 50 largest U.S. metro areas for same-sex households.

In the workplace, Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble Co. and Federated Department Stores helped pioneer anti-discrimination policies that are models for American employers. Yet plenty of gays say they feel discounted on the job.



Gay partners Bruce Beisner and Jim Wiggins show off their dogs, Daisy and Princess, to neighbors Lela Kinney and granddaughter Melanie, 6, during a walk in Northside.
The Enquirer/STEVEN M. HERPPICH

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And while the region prides itself on its Midwestern and Southern friendliness and charm, respondents to a new *Enquirer*/WCPO poll overwhelmingly rate the region only lukewarm in acceptance of gays.

This year more than ever, America is facing up to gay issues.

President Bush and John Kerry have sparred over gay legal rights in the presidential race. Voters in Ohio, Kentucky and nine other states will decide Nov. 2 on constitutional amendments that would ban same-sex marriage. Cincinnati's citizens will decide whether to repeal Article XII of the city charter, which prohibits City Council from adopting any gay-rights ordinance.

"People are not overt. They simply go in another direction. They build a wall," says Mary Hemmer, a community volunteer from Kenton County and the married mother of two young children. Her gay cousin was killed in Hawaii almost six years ago, a victim of a hate crime.

"Cincinnati has a type of bias that is more subtle, but at the same time more difficult to deal with," she says.

Lori M. Lonergan, 53, who lives in rural Clermont County and works downtown for P&G, says the world tolerates gays - as long as she and her friends avoid dangerous places.

But, she says, "we can't settle for tolerance - for anyone. Tolerance is a passive position. To me, tolerance is just a step above hatred."

Phil Burress, president of Sharonville-based Citizens for Community Values, has a different view. "We need to tolerate each other's differences," he says. "But I cannot accept that homosexuality is just like being heterosexual."

His group is leading the campaign to keep Article XII, one of the nation's few municipal prohibitions against gay-rights laws. The group's Web site speaks for many: "We believe that homosexual behavior is unhealthy and destructive to the individual, to families, and thus to communities and society as a whole."

GAY, HERE AND NOW

This *Enquirer* special report is the first of four parts:

- **Today:** [Coming to terms with gay issues](#)
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Gay in Cincinnati: What do you think?

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**THE ENQUIRER
BUSINESS TIMES**

How many here?

Nobody knows for sure how many gay men and women live in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. Recent national surveys estimate that about 5 percent of everyone in the country is gay. If that's true, at least 100,000 gays and lesbians live in our 13-county metro area, as defined by the U.S. Census.

The *Enquirer* analyzed Census data and found that more than 3,600 households are headed by couples of the same sex in the five Southwest Ohio, six Kentucky and two Southeast Indiana counties. In a few neighborhoods in Northside, Middletown and the West End, same-sex households make up 3 percent to nearly 5 percent of all households.

But mostly, gay households are rare. Of 478 census tracts in the region, 180 register no same-sex households at all.

Survey results show the region leans toward tradition, too. More than half of all adults responding to an *Enquirer*/WCPO poll on Oct. 7 said they support changing the U.S. Constitution to define marriage as only between a man and a woman.

When asked how accepted gays are in the region, the vast majority of respondents gave middle-of-the-road answers: Forty-six percent said gays are "somewhat" accepted; 35 percent said gays are "not very" accepted.

Some observers think the race riots of 2001 showed that the region struggles with diversity in general - not just with gay and lesbian issues.

The city's conservative reputation may be enhanced, also, by Citizens for Community Values. Since 1983, first in Finneytown and then in Sharonville, the group has built a national reputation for moral crusades that appeal to many people. Among the group's efforts: Fights to keep pornographic magazines and videos out of stores and hotels.

"Cincinnati is a conservative city," says Ron Clemons, 50, a licensed independent social worker from Madisonville. "It has its moments that it seems to morph into a more progressive city, but the reputation it has is a much-deserved reputation."

Creative workers

Large corporations and urban planners say gay and lesbian populations are important segments of economically healthy, diverse and vibrant cities.

In his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, writer and professor Richard Florida maintains that a city's tolerance level is an important draw for creative workers. That's why cities such as San Francisco and Austin, Texas, have thrived with startup technology companies and industries that demand

creative talent - and older cities such as Pittsburgh and Cincinnati have fallen behind.

Cincinnati's leading business leaders are campaigning for repeal of Article XII for that reason. They say the measure sends a message that the city is socially and professionally backward, which makes it harder to attract bright workers and companies.

Soon after Article XII was enacted, eight conventions expected to spend \$25 million canceled plans to meet downtown, say officials with the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau. They suspect the real impact has been much greater over time.

"This city is sometimes viewed as an intolerant, ultra-conservative" place, says Doug Moorman, vice president for government affairs for the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce. The chamber's board has unanimously endorsed Article XII's repeal.

In the years that the measure has been in effect, gays such as 53-year-old Warren M. Liang have gone about their lives.

"I don't feel persecuted. I don't feel hatred," says the associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati. "But it's painful to go through this period where, once again, people will go to the ballot box and vote about whether we're a welcoming city or not."

There's strong sentiment for keeping Article XII.

The Equal Rights No Special Rights Committee has bought billboard space urging voters to reject the repeal. It plans television and radio ads in the days before the Nov. 2 election. The ads will include a radio spot quoting the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth - a nationally respected civil rights leader - urging voters to reject the repeal.

"The thing that I disagree with is when gay people ... equate civil rights, what we did in the '50s and '60s, with special rights," Shuttlesworth says. "I think what they propose is special rights. Sexual rights is not the same as civil rights and human rights."

City Councilman Sam Malone, who chairs the Equal Rights group, says that, morally, he must support Article XII.

"Obviously, I am a family guy, and I've been pretty consistent with that my whole public life," Malone says. "Some will say (gays) are discriminated against. And I ask: 'How? Have they been denied the right to vote? Have they been denied housing? Have they been denied loans?' Show me the cases."

'People surprise you'

Many gays have learned to live with the occasional slur, while worrying that such remarks could escalate into physical violence.

Cincinnati police say four anti-gay hate crimes were reported in 2003. Two involved epithets spray-painted on property, and two were felonious assaults.

One assault occurred in Clifton Heights/University Heights/Fairview, where an assailant called his 23-year-old victim a pervert, said he was teaching him a lesson, and struck him in the face with a pipe. In the other assault, two men ages 33 and 44 were attacked while walking on Walnut Street downtown. Two other men jumped from a vehicle and punched and kicked the victims in the head and body.

"There's a lot of homophobia in Cincinnati, simply because people don't understand each other," says Cecil Thomas, a former police officer who now directs the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission, which works to end prejudice and discrimination in the city.

Avoiding potentially ugly situations is part of gay life here.

"You make decisions about where you're going to live, where you're going to work, who you're going to talk to and how you're going to be open - to avoid" problems, says Bruce Beisner, 36. The Northside resident is editor of *Greater Cincinnati GLBT News*, a monthly newspaper for the region's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

He hopes things are changing for the better, though, and says he's been gratified while campaigning for the repeal of Article XII.

"People surprise you quite frequently," he says. "A person you think might be very close-minded will tell you, 'I have a lesbian daughter, and I support this.' "

Tolerance vs. acceptance

Harrison, who is 48 and lives in Mariemont, started his law career in 1990. Ten years later, he became the first openly gay partner at Frost Brown Todd, a firm that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and provides domestic partner-benefits for gay employees.

Harrison says gay lawyers and other professionals operate in a much friendlier environment today because management doesn't want to be perceived as prejudiced. Also, America has reached a certain "comfort level around the abstract notion of the existence of gay folk."

"But there's still - I don't know how to describe it - sort of the 'ick factor,'" he says. "This notion of two men together, being physical with each other, somehow grosses people out."

It's perhaps one reason why many local gays react strongly when asked if they would hold hands with a partner while walking down a public street.

"Oh, no," says Clemons, the Madisonville social worker. "That's the difference between tolerance and acceptance. You'd find out just how unaccepting Cincinnati is if you did that. I can't begin to tell you the number of people who say, when you walk down the street holding hands, 'You're throwing (homosexuality) in my face.'"

Many gays say they fear the backlash that might result. They say there's less second-guessing about hand-holding in cities with identifiable centers of gay life. Columbus, for instance, has its Short North district, north of downtown.

"We don't really have that in Cincinnati," says Dean Forster, a 36-year-old architect from Covington. "We have a pocket in Clifton, and a pocket in Northside and one downtown. We don't have a place to be visible all the time."

What's more, gays themselves often choose to remain invisible. They could help create a more gay-friendly city, Harrison believes, if more were willing to come out.

Still, it takes a broad cross-section of people to move a community from tolerance to acceptance.

Gays "want to be tolerated, and we do" tolerate them, says Burress, of Citizens for Community Values. "They say, 'Tolerance, tolerance, tolerance.' In the political realm, they are really saying, 'Acceptance, acceptance, acceptance.'"

"We will not do that. I cannot do that because of my personal beliefs."

Thomas, of the Human Relations Commission, takes a different view.

"In order for Cincinnati to move forward, we have to embrace the cultures of all of our people who live here. We have to learn to respect and appreciate all of our differences," he says.

"That's how the rest of the country, the rest of the world, will see us."

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