

Fight against bias never ends, ACLU chief says

Glasser to speak in Louisville tomorrow night

By SHANNON TANGONAN
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Ira Glasser has led the American Civil Liberties Union long enough to know that when one issue fades, another emerges to take its place. While the cities and the details have changed in the 30

years he has worked with the ACLU — 22 as its executive director — the issues “are remarkably the same. . . . It just keeps morphing into different forms,” he said. Glasser, 62, who will speak in Louisville tomorrow at the ACLU of Kentucky’s seventh annual Bill of Rights Dinner, is retiring next July. “If I worked five more years, the issues would still be there. It’s a perpetual game,” Glasser said. “What more do I accomplish for the cause?” The cause has remained consistent over the years: champi-

“The issues are remarkably the same now” as 30 years ago.

Ira Glasser, executive director of the ACLU

oning First Amendment rights no matter how unpopular the speech, and fighting discrimination at every turn. Today the rights of gays and lesbians, and opposition to racial profiling, are part of the ACLU’s broad national agenda

— and issues in Kentucky. “I remember people having trouble when you couldn’t discriminate on the basis of sex and race,” Glasser said. Now people are having difficulty extending traditional civil rights to gays and lesbians.

A lawsuit by Louisville gynecologist Dr. J. Barrett Hyman against the city and Jefferson County over their gay-rights ordinances is one example. The city ordinance bars discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment; the county’s measure bars such discrimination in public accommodations, housing and employment. Hyman said the laws violate his religious freedom. The lawsuits remind Glasser of similar cases in the 1950s and 1960s, when many people thought they had the right —

which they justified by their religious beliefs — not to hire African Americans, or serve them in their restaurants and hotels. The whites argued that their religious beliefs were being violated by the government, which was forcing them to serve and hire people of color, Glasser said. The government could not force someone to invite a black person to dinner, but the laws could force owners of restaurants, stores or other public ac-

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accommodations to hire and serve them, he said.

That same reasoning can be applied to discrimination based on sexual orientation, he said.

“People are arguing that they have the right to discriminate against people on their sexual orientation. We don’t think so,” Glasser said.

The ACLU also has zeroed in on racial profiling, which is a byproduct of the nation’s war on drugs, Glasser said.

“The racial profiling issue is always present in the criminal justice system,” Glasser said. “Black folks are not any more likely to be carrying drugs, yet they’re the ones disproportionately stopped (by police).”

The only way to put an end to the practice is to keep records on whom police pull over, Glasser said.

He commended the state’s effort to study the problem but added there is no reason for Louisville and Jefferson County police not to participate.

Louisville police officials are considering participating in a state plan to record the driver’s race in every traffic stop, but have said they may do their own study. Jefferson County police officials said they haven’t had any complaints of racial profiling and already keep track of the race of those cited or arrested.

FOR TICKETS

Tickets for the American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky’s Bill of Rights Dinner tomorrow evening are still available. For more information, call 581-1181.

“They ought to be willing to keep records to put it to rest,” Glasser said.

The nation’s war on drugs has become a major concern for the ACLU, he said, noting that it has spawned a slew of fundamental problems including illegal searches.

“(Drug prohibition) is becoming more and more of an engine of violation of rights and racial discrimination,” Glasser said. Even though whites use more drugs than blacks, a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latinos are stopped by police and put behind bars on non-violent drug violations, he said.

Tactics to curb the drug trade, such as roadblocks like those set up by Louisville police, raise constitutional questions and are not productive, he said. The roadblocks were set up after a spate of gun violence.

“No matter how terrible the crime, you don’t suspend the Constitution and stop and search everybody,” Glasser said. “If you set up barriers and passports, you’re hanging the innocent along with the guilty.”

Glasser said when he retires in July he’ll be leaving these issues for his successor to battle. He is confident the organization will do fine without him.

“The difference between now and when the ACLU started is we’re much bigger and better resourced,” Glasser said. “Our agenda is as broad as the Bill of Rights itself.”