

# Miami Sees Challenge On Gay Rights, Again

## Battle From 1970's Resurfaces on Ballot

By DANA CANEDY

MIAMI, Sept. 4 — More than two decades after the campaign by the entertainer Anita Bryant to overturn one of the country's first gay rights ordinances divided Miami and cast the city as a symbol of intolerance, voters will face the issue again on Tuesday.

Conservative Christian groups have placed a measure on the ballot to repeal a Miami-Dade County ordinance approved four years ago protecting gays from discrimination.

But this time the move for repeal has been met with outrage by many residents and city leaders who are not just opposed to it, but are actively campaigning against it.

The battle over the initiative is highly charged and is being closely watched by gay rights activists and civil rights organizations nationally. But the outcome may be more a measure of just how much Miami has evolved in its acceptance of diverse lifestyles since the first measure was repealed.

In a city often divided by race and ethnicity, a poll released today by The Miami Herald and the local NBC television station found strong opposition to the repeal measure in all racial and ethnic groups.

"We're trying to build an image of international metropolis, a bridge among cultures, but we would be saying, 'By the way, it's O.K. to discriminate based on sexual orientation,'" said Mayor Alex Penelas of Miami-Dade County. "That would just be wrong. We would be turning the clock back several years."

Mayor Penelas has become so involved in the issue that he has recorded a phone message that is being played to residents in which he urges them to vote against the repeal.

Hundreds of other prominent Miami business, civic, community and religious leaders, including the singer Gloria Estefan, the Latin television personality Cristina Saralegui and the mayors of more than 30 county municipalities, also support the "No to Discrimination/SAVE Dade" campaign opposing the repeal.

Civic and community leaders say repeal would threaten not only the livelihoods of local gay men and lesbians but also the county's all-important tourism industry and Miami's image as an international city that embraces diversity.

Proponents of repeal, led by a group called Take Back Miami-Dade and supported by the Christian Coalition of Miami-Dade County and other conservative religious groups, say the ordinance extends unnecessary protection to people with deviant lifestyles.

Since getting the measure on the ballot, supporters have become less vocal in the face of widespread criticism.

But Nathaniel Wilcox, co-chairman of Take Back Miami-Dade, which was formed to support the repeal, said of gays: "They are using a tactic of deception in order to get into the government to force their lifestyle on people. As a Christian, as a man of God, I can't stand up and justify backing a behavior that destroys families."

The ordinance was passed in December 1998, when Miami-Dade County commissioners voted 7 to 6 to amend the county's antidiscrimination ordinance to prohibit unequal treatment of gays in housing, employment, credit and finance and public accommodation. The 1998 ordinance is similar to the one that had been overturned. At the time, there were two catalysts for the change here.

One was the case of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming who died in October 1998 after he was kidnapped, beaten and left tied to a fence for 18 hours. The crime prompted outrage over hate crimes nationwide and became a theme here during the hearing that preceded the 1998 vote.

The other factor was that many Miami-Dade political and civic leaders rallied behind the measure, arguing that intolerance was bad for an economy that depended on tourism and a county with a sizable gay population. Today more than ever, Miami Beach's trendy South Beach section is heavily populated with gay residents and attracts many gay tourists each year.

Organizers of the repeal initiative have been determined to challenge the ordinance since it was passed. Take Back Miami-Dade failed to ob-