

Transgender educators spur debate on Minnesota law

Some vow to fight state's protection of gender identity

By STEPHANIE SIMON
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MINNEAPOLIS — It's illegal in Minnesota to fire a worker because of race. Sandy Crosby has no problem with that. Nor can someone be axed because he or she is homosexual. Crosby is OK with that too.

But Minnesota is also the only state in the nation to protect transgender residents against discrimination. Employers cannot fire people for presenting an "identity not traditionally associated with (their) biological maleness or femaleness."

And Crosby has a big, big problem with that.

WHEN HER suburban school district hired a transgender music teacher for her daughters' middle school, Crosby was outraged. She did not want her girls to consider a man in pantyhose a role model. She did not want them sharing a restroom with a man who believes he's a woman. Above all, she did not want the state of Minnesota protecting a teacher whose lifestyle she considers morally wrong.

"We don't think school is the place to shove this in our kids' faces," Crosby said.

"We'll fight it," she vowed. "I mean it. We will."

In a showdown that promises to spark much debate, Crosby and several like-minded parents have teamed up with conservative advocacy groups to try to excise the transgender clause from Minnesota's 1993 Human Rights Act.

They've already won one victory. The music teacher, Alyssa Williams, resigned in February, complaining that her foes had "worked tirelessly to get rid of me." Williams has since refused all interviews, but said in a written statement: "They do not want to accept that I exist."

MANY PARENTS did support Williams, championing her as a real-life example of the need to respect diversity. After she disclosed she was biologically male, although she had legally changed her identity to female, only 25 of the more than 400 students she taught withdrew from her classes. Another transgender educator, a Minneapolis librarian, also won the backing of many parents after "coming out" as a woman last spring.

"This is Minnesota," gay-rights activist Bart Cannon said. "We have a tradition of respect."

The campaign to revise the Human Rights Act will test that tradition.

Gov. Jesse Ventura has promised to support the law as it is. "He is unabashedly in support of human rights for everyone," spokesman John Wodele said.

Still, transgender activists feel vulnerable. As Riki Anne Wilchins, director of a national advocacy group called Gender PAC, put it: "In polite company, you no longer make jokes about gays and lesbians. But gender

difference is still a socially acceptable reason to hate."

The advocacy group's clients include everyone who feels as though their true identity does not match their biological sex. It embraces cross-dressers and those who blend male and female traits for an androgynous image, as well as people who live full-time as the opposite sex. Some, but not all, have surgery or take hormones to aid the transition.

A HANDFUL of cities — including San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Seattle and Iowa City — have ordinances protecting such people from discrimi-

nation. Only Minnesota offers statewide protection. The Human Rights Act holds that no one be denied employment, housing or public accommodation (such as service in a restaurant or tickets to a ballgame) because of gender identity. Religious associations and private youth groups are exempt.

"It has really given transgender people more confidence to ... express their true identities," said Walter Bockting, who directs the program in human sexuality at the University of Minnesota.

It certainly gave a boost to librar-

ian David Nielsen, who had worked in Minneapolis public schools 28 years before the Human Rights Act — as well as his own growing self-confidence — moved him to announce he was living a lie. Although biologically a man, he had long felt his true identity is female. For years, he had been transforming himself into Debra Davis after work. Now, he wanted to be Debra on the job as well.

The school staff supported him. So Debra Davis came out at Southwest High School last May, with television cameras whirring.

Davis, 52, may well be the only "out" transgender educator in the country who works directly with secondary school students, activists say. She is also Exhibit A for those opposing the Human Rights Act.

"By sending a message that it's just another acceptable lifestyle, you get kids thinking, 'Maybe that's where I want to go,'" said Tom Prichard, president of the Minnesota Family Council. "For many people, that's morally objectionable."

Davis scoffs at such reasoning: "It's not like it's catching. I don't re-