

# Gay rights: What's the agenda?

The leading gay-rights group convenes in Washington, D.C., this weekend. But the real action, on issues from job benefits to gay adoption, is closer to home.

**W**HEN HUNDREDS of activists meet this weekend in Washington, D.C., for the annual conference of the nation's largest gay-rights group, their focus will be on urging Congress to pass legislation to ban discrimination in the workplace. Last fall the bill, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, fell short by one vote in the Senate.

But the battle over gay rights is shifting away from Washington and into state legislatures, workplaces and homes. Dominating the agenda this year are marriage, parenthood and job benefits for gays and lesbians.

Gay rights leader Elizabeth Birch says she sees a "tremendous mainstreaming" of gay issues — and clout. "We are sitting at the table of power," asserts Birch, head of the 175,000-member Human Rights Campaign, the group meeting this weekend in Washington. "We have to be reckoned with."

Even cultural conservatives agree that attitudes and policies toward the nation's large, politically powerful gay population have changed dramatically in recent years. But, opponents maintain, there is a limit to Americans' "tolerance" on gay-rights issues, which they view as a debate over morals, not rights.

"They've made rocketlike progress over the past five years toward normalization of homosexuality in the culture," says Robert Knight, spokesman for the conservative Family Research Council. "But they are about to hit a stone wall."

It's hard to tell. On one hand, a new wave of anti-gay-marriage laws is sweeping the country. State legislatures are lining up to pass bans on same-sex marriage following last year's resounding passage of the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which said states need not



Protesters at last summer's Republican National Convention in San Diego.

recognize a gay marriage sanctioned by another state. But, reflecting the nation's split personality on gay issues, the same day the Senate passed that law it also came within one vote of approving the ban on job discrimination against gays. Even the gay community is divided over which issues to press.

"Gays are most concerned about employment, personal safety and AIDS," Birch says. "Only half of them think marriage is an important issue."

Across the country, hard-won gains are being made in gay rights — but not without a backlash. Here's a look at what's happening.

**Same-sex marriage.** Last year, 16 states banned gay marriage. At press time, 17 more were considering doing so. At the same time, gay couples probably soon will be able to tie the knot legally in at least one state: In Hawaii, gay activ-

ists predict a judge's decision allowing same-sex marriage will be upheld when it reaches the state Supreme Court. Now some lawmakers are pushing for an amendment to Hawaii's constitution to prohibit gay marriage.

**Job benefits.** While gay marriage makes headlines, gay partners quietly are making tremendous gains in their access to health and insurance benefits. At least 313 companies, including IBM and Disney, now extend benefits to "domestic partners." But even corporate decisions trigger opposition. The Southern Baptist Convention, with 16 million members, called for a boycott of Disney last year over the entertainment giant's gay-friendly policies.

In San Francisco, a new ordinance requiring city contractors to offer benefits to domestic partners takes effect this July, although not without controversy. After Roman Catholic Church officials asked to be exempt in their charitable contracts, a compromise finally was worked out. At press time, the city was negotiating with United Airlines, which had been threatened with the loss of its airport lease if it refused to comply.

In Virginia, lawmakers are consid-

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ering a bill that would extend benefits to gay partners of state employees.

**Parenting.** Across the country, more and more gay and lesbian couples are raising kids, or would like to, through adoption, foster parenting or artificial insemination. An increasing number of studies show that children raised by gay parents are no more likely to grow up to be gay themselves than children raised by heterosexual parents. Thirteen states now allow gay and lesbian adoptions, while two — Florida and New Hampshire — actually ban them.

Yet some parents have lost custody. Last year a Virginia mother gave up a three-year court fight to regain custody of her 5-year-old son. She had been ruled unfit because she is a lesbian.

**Back in Washington.** Few expect gay rights to capture headlines in the capital this year, as President Clinton and Congress downplay divisive gay issues in favor of "mainstream" topics such as education and balancing the budget.

But that doesn't mean activists on both sides won't try. Human Rights Campaign chief Birch calls pushing the federal anti-job-bias bill her top priority. And conservative Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., has introduced legislation aimed at rolling back the Clinton administration's bans on discrimination against gays in the federal workforce. **W**

— By Carol Clurman, with Myron B. Pitts and Sandra McElwaine



**Sen. Jesse Helms wants Congress to block gay-rights laws.**



**Elizabeth Birch leads the fight for gay rights in the workplace.**