

TRUMP TAKES ON BILL BRADLEY,  
GAY ISSUES, AND THE PRESIDENCY

The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine

# the Advocate

February 15, 2000 | www.advocate.com

AN EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW

## Dr. Laura

THE DANGEROUS  
NEW VOICE  
OF HOMOPHOBIA

Within hours of Vermont's  
gay marriage news, this woman  
urged 20 million listeners to  
bombard the legislature with  
cries of outrage. Now she's  
taking her cruel campaign to TV.  
Can she be stopped?

\$3.95 USA • \$4.95 CAN. • £2.95 UK





**H**OW DO YOU go from mother and radio talk-show host to public enemy number 1 in the eyes of gay activists? If you are Dr. Laura Schlessinger, you would say you do it by following your heart and speaking your mind.

"If you are gay or lesbian, it's a biological error that inhibits you from relating normally to the opposite sex," Schlessinger has said. "The fact that you are intelligent, creative, and valuable is all true. The error is in your inability to relate sexually, intimately, in a loving way to a member of the opposite sex."

It's a belief bound to create controversy and one Schlessinger swears is heartfelt. She has gained popularity by discouraging unwed couples from "shacking up" and encouraging parents to spend quality time with their children, so when she calls gay men and lesbians "deviants" and "mistakes" in her inimitably take-no-prisoners style, she says she's just telling it as it is. And in an exclusive written interview with *The Advocate*, she says that no matter what the activists say, she's not about to change her tune.

This "doctor knows best" attitude is what has made *The Dr. Laura Program* the most-listened-to radio program in the country, with more than 20 million listeners on nearly 500 stations in the United States and Canada. In addition Schlessinger writes a syndicated column that is carried in more than 100 newspapers in the United States and has a TV program planned for the fall. The problem, activists say, is that she is now riding a wave of antigay sentiment. Whereas Schlessinger said in 1996, "I ▶

# Diss



DAVID BROWN/USA1

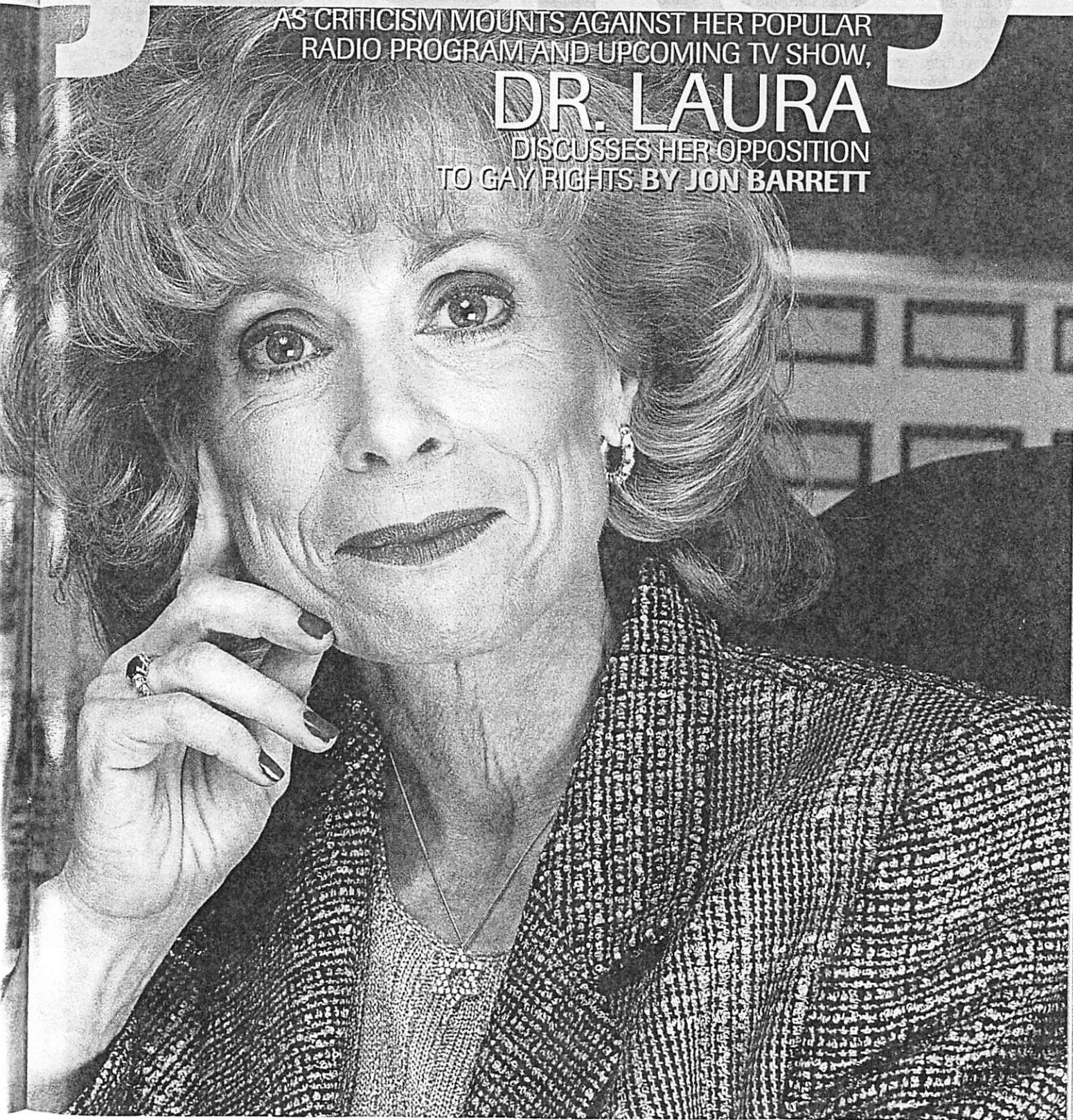


# jockey

AS CRITICISM MOUNTS AGAINST HER POPULAR  
RADIO PROGRAM AND UPCOMING TV SHOW,

## DR. LAURA

DISCUSSES HER OPPOSITION  
TO GAY RIGHTS BY JON BARRETT



cannot in good conscience tell someone that they cannot have a lifelong companion of love and affection," she now tells listeners that when God created Adam "he didn't get Adam another guy. He didn't get Adam three guys. He got Adam a woman."

That change in attitude has made Schlessinger the leader in the broadcast charge against gay rights. In her most recent campaign, she has taken to the ramparts against December's Vermont supreme court decision recognizing the rights of gay partnerships, urging her listeners and visitors to her Web site to bombard Vermont legislators with messages of outrage. Anything that legitimizes gay marriage is simply contrary to God's plan, she argues.

In the past year Schlessinger has told her listeners and readers about the moral perils she sees in gay marriage, gay parenting, and hate-crimes legislation and has become one of the biggest proponents of reparative therapy, the so-called cure for homosexuality. She has derided groups such as the American Psychological Association and the National Education Association while promulgating dubious reports from no-

toriously antigay religious-right groups Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council. And she has done it all from a media empire that will grow even larger in the fall, when she kicks off an hourlong weekday TV talk show. All the while her popularity continues to grow.

Schlessinger didn't begin her career on the same note. "My first experience hearing her on the radio—and at that point it was pretty early on—she was defending gays," says Vickie L. Bane, author of 1999's *Dr. Laura: The Unauthorized Biography*. "I thought, *Well, that's a pretty positive point of view*, [especially] from someone who at that point already was starting to convert to [Orthodox] Judaism. I would have never dreamed two years ago...that she would have gone this far."

The 53-year-old Schlessinger, who lives with her husband, Lew Bishop, and their 14-year-old son, Deryk, in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, agrees that there has been a shift in her thinking regarding gay men and lesbians. A self-proclaimed moralist—her Ph.D. is in physiology, not psychology—Schlessinger points to religion as the main impetus behind this shift.

"I have grown in faith in Judaism, which forbids acting out sexually with a member of the same gender, or different gender outside of marriage, and believes that marriage is a covenant with God and a man and a woman," she wrote to *The Advocate*, insisting that her rants against gay rights are actually compassionate. "It has not altered my personal, oft-stated position that homosexual people, like all other people, are entitled to respect and kindness as fellow human beings."

Indeed, Schlessinger says, she enjoys close relationships with several gay men and lesbians. A former chief engineer of her radio show (who recently retired after ten years) and her closest male friend are both gay. A top-level executive on her upcoming TV show is a lesbian, she says. "They actually agree with me that legalizing homosexual marriage and adoption is wrong."

But Schlessinger says that if anything, contact with gay activists has only made her harden her stand against gay-rights issues. "Another influence on the evolution of my attitude about homosexuality has been the rise of the radical gay and lesbian agenda, which

NEWSMAKERS

## Onward, Christian soldiers

### Christian radio proves a potent medium for antigay politics **BY HANS JOHNSON**

Long before the Vermont supreme court's decision on gay couples' rights ever came down, James Dobson knew how to deal with public defeats. In October 1998 the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based religious broadcaster caught wind of a syndicated newspaper column implicating himself and other religious conservatives in the murder of gay Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard. In a radio commentary beamed into millions of homes via thousands of local stations that carry his Christian programs, Dobson sprang into action by assailing the columnist, Deborah Mathis of Gannett News Service, and urged his listeners to phone her in protest. In a political organizer's dream come true, Mathis's office was immediately inundated with thousands of calls.

The attack on Mathis is just one sign of the power that Dobson—the nation's biggest religious broadcaster after TV mogul Pat Robertson—has meticulously assembled through two

decades of programming produced through Focus on the Family, the organization he founded in 1977.

"They're mushrooming," says Jerry Sloan, president of Project Tocsin, a Sacramento-based group that monitors the religious right. Sloan cites figures published in April in Focus on the Family's glossy magazine, which claim that Dobson's programs now reach over 660 million people in 95 countries. In the United States alone, 3,023 broadcast facilities, including some secular stations, carry Focus on the Family programming, a spokeswoman says. This radio empire is responsible, Sloan says, for the 2000 presidential candidacy of Gary Bauer, a protégé whom Dobson has introduced to his audience as a frequent guest on his programs.

Dobson's voice is the most resonant among conservatives on the Christian airwaves, according to Karl Stoll, spokesman for the National Religious Broadcasters, a national trade association





falsely purports to represent the views of all homosexuals," she says. "Their position is that the only grounds for opposing this agenda is bigotry and that there are no legitimate reasons for resisting the total normalization of homosexuality as a behavior and a lifestyle or the legalization of same-sex marriage and families. They brand anyone who disagrees with this as a homophobe and a hate-speaker, and they use these epithets to frighten and intimidate people who oppose them on perfectly legitimate moral grounds."

However it might sound to the average listener, Schlessinger maintains that her radio preaching is not meant to condemn gay people since that kind of judgment is reserved for God alone; instead, she says, she wants to bring society back to its Judeo-Christian roots. But according to Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, Schlessinger's stock in trade is fire and brimstone.

"Dr. Laura is able to take advantage of legitimate fears on the part of parents," Jennings says. "They know that if they have a child who is gay or lesbian, that child's life is going to be more diffi-

cult. What Dr. Laura holds out to them is a false hope that they can protect their child by fixing their child."

Late last year GLSEN helped distribute a pamphlet, "Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth," to high school superintendents across the country. Developed and endorsed by ten education, health, religious, and mental health organizations, the pamphlet—which advises against reparative therapy and outlines its "potential to do harm"—upset Schlessinger, who attacked it in December through her newspaper column.

"I have never suggested that [reparative therapy] is something all homosexuals should do," she tells *The Advocate*. "What angers me is that the professional organizations for psychologists and psychiatrists have said that working with homosexuals who wish to change their sexual orientation is *unethical!* Imagine if you were a homosexual who was tormented by your sexuality and wished to explore the possibility of changing it [but] were turned away because the doctor or therapist feared being sanctioned by their peers. I think that's unbelievably cruel."

Schlessinger is very careful to present her advice to gay men and lesbians as "love the sinner, hate the sin." She argues that she criticizes gay people for acting out sexually, not for being gay. But critics say this compassionate conservatism philosophy often proves false.

"This is a distinction that rarely seems to be manifest in reality as opposed to blather," says Larry Gross, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. "After all, it's the sinner, not the sin, who gets bashed or denied employment."

Gross argues that critics of homosexuality such as Schlessinger who use scripture often follow other biblical condemnations haphazardly. "The religious claim is laughable on all the usual grounds: Why single out this prohibition from Leviticus while ignoring all the others listed in the same chapter?" he says.

Schlessinger understandably resents suggestions that her radio show fosters the environment of bigotry and ignorance that led to the murders of Matthew Shepard, Pfc. Barry Winchell, and countless other gay men and lesbians.

"I am a member of a group that has been persecuted for millennia," she ►

whose members include broadcast operations of other well-known televangelists such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. But the Colorado commentator is far from alone on the dial. Christian radio broadcasters have established a commanding—and largely unnoticed—network for preaching to their followers, targeting key issues and whipping up antigay sentiment. NRB says there are 21 million regular listeners to Christian radio nationwide on 1,731 stations, a fourfold increase since 1971.

Janet Parshall, chief spokeswoman for the Washington, D.C.-based antigay powerhouse Family Research Council, moonlights as a radio-show host from the studios of WAVA-FM in nearby Arlington, Va. Reaching into 30 states, Parshall's show puts a folksy touch on hard-edged family-values diatribes. Parshall, who honed her broadcast skills while assisting Beverly LaHaye at the religious-right group Concerned Women for America, regularly in-

cludes antigay researcher Peter LaBarbera and so-called ex-gays Yvette Cantu and Michael Johnston as guests on her show.

Despite Parshall's grip on grassroots conservatives, her numbers pale beside those of another big name in conservative broadcasting: Michael Reagan. With political commentary that regularly runs a few notches further to the right of his father, the former president, Reagan reaches into 44 states out of the same Sherman Oaks, Calif., facility where the Dr. Laura show originates [see main story]. Reagan's attacks on nondiscrimination protections include the charge that gay rights kills the First Amendment. In 1999 Reagan took the helm of the Campaign for Working Families, the right-wing, antigay political action committee spun off from the Family Research Council two years earlier; both organizations were headed by Bauer before he declared his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination. Guests featured on Reagan's show include Randy Thomasson, a leading proponent of the Knight initiative, the California ballot measure to ban recognition of gay marriages.

Yet the biggest voice in Christian radio is not an individual but a corporation. Salem Communications, based in Camarillo, Calif., presides over a

radio empire that extends well beyond the nearly 50 stations it runs outright—to over 1,000 stations that purchase its programming, such as the Parshall show. If Salem seems to have perfected the blend of Christian ministry with conservative politics, it's for a good reason. CEO Edward Atsinger, a longtime member of the far-right political steering committee known as the Council on National Policy, is a mogul of far-right politics who has generously bankrolled GOP campaigns in California in the 1990s, including over \$528,000 in 1998 alone. His recent forays into antigay politics include \$50,000 contributed in 1999 to the campaign supporting the Knight initiative.

Generous patronage by angels like Atsinger continues to prompt some of the many local voices in Christian radio to jump full-fledged into conservative politics. In California's 74th state assembly district, for instance, Mason Weaver, who introduced himself to voters as a talk show host on the local airwaves, is running in the March GOP primary and can credit the national conservative funding network for many of his contributions. ■

*Johnson, an editor at Academe magazine, writes about religion and politics.*

## Midas touch

James Dobson has turned his religious broadcasts into activism gold.

responds. "To suggest that because I do not support hate-crimes legislation for any group, I am indifferent to the suffering of others is reprehensible. And to circulate the pernicious notion that because I believe homosexual sex deviates from the norm, I am a hatemonger and homophobe is deceitful."

In fact, Schlessinger maintains that she is the victim in the debate. "Interestingly enough, I am accused by the activists of inciting hate, which is totally absurd, and yet it is they who incite hate toward me," she adds. "I don't know of any gay person who has gotten a death threat attributed to anything I said on the air. But I have gotten them based on the misrepresentation of my views by activists."

Despite her obvious disdain for gay activists, it seemed Schlessinger had found one she could reason with in the summer of 1999 when she received "the most articulate letter I've ever gotten from a critic"—from Joan Garry, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. (In its role as a media watchdog, GLAAD has spearheaded the activists' campaign against Schlessinger's rhetoric.) After meeting a couple of times, the women sat down for a heart-to-heart debate on homosexuality, which was published in Schlessinger's *Perspective* magazine.

"Talking in [*Perspective*] presents us with an opportunity to reach her listeners on terms that make sense to them, emphasizing family and equality," Garry said in July. "It was about recognizing that her words have real impact on people's lives."

Garry's optimism soon withered. GLAAD called the debate with Schlessinger unsuccessful after it was published in August. "Dr. Laura is impervious to reason, unbendable," Garry said after the debate, which, according to *Perspective*, had both women in tears. "She has managed to place herself above the medical community she claims to be part of." Garry and Schlessinger haven't been in touch since.

GLAAD then shifted its focus to an education campaign, encouraging gay men and lesbians to send Schlessinger positive letters about being gay. But that was discontinued when it too was deemed unsuccessful.

"Obviously the woman is in show business.... Her schtick is her point of

view," says GLAAD communications director Steve Spurgeon. "All we're asking is that it not be disrespectful, that it not be exclusionary of obvious and scientific information that is available to anyone."

In addition to maintaining contact with the executive producer of Schlessinger's radio program, Spurgeon says GLAAD has shifted focus to Paramount Domestic Television, which will produce and distribute Schlessinger's daily TV talk show. Paramount officials, who are scheduled to meet with GLAAD regarding the show for a second time this month, have had little to say about Schlessinger's show.

"We know it's an hour long, we know it's a daytime show, and we know she's the host," says a Paramount spokeswoman. "It's really, really in the heat of development right now. We haven't pinned down the format. And that's typical for a syndication show right now."

Nevertheless, activists who have had little success in their attempts to temper Schlessinger's radio rhetoric are holding on to the hope that television may be her Waterloo. At least one industry observer acknowledges that Schlessinger's brand of tough love may be too tough for a medium in which reconciliation and hugs sell. In expanding, Schlessinger could find the limits of her appeal.

"Whereas in radio you have to pump up the emotion so as not to be boring, on television any kind of pumped-up emotion—hateful speech, nastiness, vindictiveness, judgmentalism—comes across as very harsh," says Michael Harrison, publisher of *Talkers Magazine*, a trade publication for the radio industry. "If Laura Schlessinger is going to start gay bashing on TV, she will look nasty. And that is one of her biggest vulnerabilities."

But will she ever turn down the volume? Jennings says she may have to or risk losing listeners. "Using terms like 'biological error,' when most people in this country have a gay or lesbian family member, forces people who are currently on the fence [regarding gay issues] to take a stand," he says. "They'll either have to stand with Dr. Laura and say that their loved one is a biological error, or they'll stand by their son—or daughter or brother or sister or mom or dad—and change the dial." ■

Find more on Dr. Laura Schlessinger and the activist campaigns regarding her show at [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)

## Dr. Laura on...

(Excerpts from *The Dr. Laura Program*)

**The Vermont same-sex partners rights decision:** "If two men can be sanctified in this country as marriage, then what is your logical or justifiable reason to exclude adult incest? A man and a woman—consensual, 25 years old, who are brother and sister—should not be discriminated against because they have a genetic relationship."

**President Clinton's gay pride proclamation:** "He wants us to celebrate that it is a sad state of affairs, in my opinion—that there are some people who cannot or will not commune with members of the opposite sex in an intimate way and be married and make children in families. That men have to have sex with men is not something to celebrate. It's a sadness."

**Gay parenting:** "You're not going to fight to make sure that homosexuals and lesbians can't adopt children from birth who can go to heterosexual families, so [the children] will be intentionally robbed of a father or a mother on purpose in spite of all the psychological and sociological literature? You're going to stand by and let this happen, just go to work and put gas in your car today? Don't you care about children?"

**The proposal to ban antigay discrimination in California's public schools:** "The concern of a lot of these bills is that they take sexual, deviant behavior into schools from kindergarten up and say it's normal and equivalent to heterosexual [behavior], which sort of undermines the basic foundation of civilization."

**Equal rights for gays:** "Rights? For sexual deviants, sexual behavior, there are now rights? That's what I'm worried about with the pedophilia and the bestiality and the sadomasochism and the cross-dressing. Is this all going to be rights too? Why does deviant sexual behavior get rights?"

**AIDS funding:** "I'm making an announcement: Not one penny will I give to AIDS anything as long as [public sex is allowed in gay bathhouses]. Not cent one. It's a preventable disease. If you don't want to prevent it, I don't want to pay for it."