

# Facing the FEAR

A contested rights ordinance grows from a clash between gays and a Ypsilanti business.

BY LISA MARTINO

As the Ypsilanti City Council meeting carries on in an adjacent room, Jimie Blair sits and shakes his head.

"It amazes me," he says. "I just want equal rights, I don't want anything special."

Blair is a gay, 41-year-old Romulus resident who works in Ypsilanti, where many gays, lesbians and bisexuals say their right to service from local businesses is in jeopardy unless the city adds a new ordinance.

For Blair and other ordinance proponents, it's an issue of equal rights.

But some Ypsilanti residents say they fear that the ordinance would mandate special rights and treatment for homosexuals; they say the ordinance would force business owners to service people whose views or practices go against owners' values or beliefs.

According to Jeffrey Montgomery, president of the Triangle Foundation, a gay advocacy group, the issue has played out elsewhere in the state. Nine cities in Michigan have ordinances that to some degree ban discrimination based on sexual orientation: Detroit, East Lansing, Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Birmingham, Oak Park, Douglas and Flint.

Ypsilanti's proposed ordinance would prohibit discrimination in the city based on a number of factors: race, sex, marital status, family status, age, disability, national origin, source of income and sexual orientation.

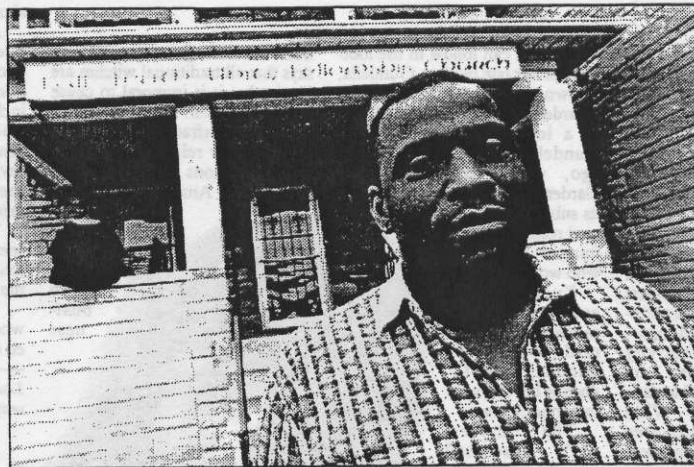
Talk of the ordinance, which is being drafted by city officials, is what brought Blair and many others before the council last month.

"I felt that I had to take a chance and take a stand," he says.

Taking a stand has also been on 35-year-old Ypsilanti resident Paul Heaton's mind lately.

"It would be open season on gays not to enact an ordinance," he says.

Heaton is a member of Citizens



Jimie Blair says his faith helped him affirm his sexuality.

for Community, a group of more than 60 gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual ordinance supporters.

Gay residents took up the issue following an incident earlier this year.

In February, Tri-Pride, an Eastern Michigan University club of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered social work students, went to Hansen's Standard Printing Co. to print raffle tickets for a Halt the Hate vigil designed to bring together student groups that have been discriminated against. Hansen's refused.

At the time, Loren and Carole Hansen reportedly said their decision was not discriminatory and they have a right to refuse service to organizations that seek to promote a lifestyle or philosophies they view as morally wrong. The Hansens declined comment to the Metro Times.

"Special rights given to any behavior-based group ... that's the issue here," says the Rev. Wesley Rowe, pastor of Calvary Bible Church and a friend of the Hansen

family.

"The Hansens didn't reject the print job because people were homosexuals. They rejected it because of the content of the material. ... No one should be forced to support or oppose your lifestyle.

Everybody has the right to be refused."

Rowe says he has no objection to many of the protections that the ordinance calls for, such as protection against discrimination based on age, national origin or income level. But when sexual preference enters the picture, there should be a distinction, he says.

"Race? It is something you're born with. My age? I have no say over it. But homosexuality is a chosen lifestyle — that is a behavior," says Rowe.

But gay citizens say their sexual orientation is not a matter of choice, it's an inherent characteristic.

"This is not a lifestyle, it's my life and I'm not going to change it to suit someone else's way of

thinking," says activist Charles Duty.

Since February, Citizens for Community has been making its case to Ypsilanti business people and residents by handing out fliers, pins and small cards that read "There ought to be a law against discrimination in Ypsilanti," on one side and "Nice doing business with you! Did you know that it is legal in Ypsilanti for your business to discriminate against me?" on

the other.

"Every time a dollar drops, a card has to drop," says Duty. "Every single person in Ypsilanti has the right to live their life as they choose, without discrimination."

Heaton and Duty say businesses have been very cordial to members of CFC passing out cards.

"Most businesses have said, 'Yes, we'll do business with you.' They are very surprised there is not an anti-discrimination ordinance already," says Heaton.

Opponents are also mobilizing in Citizens Opposed to Special Treatment (COST).

COST member Judy Bloss says no one in business should be forced to go against religious principles if doing so will promote a behavior they object to.

"The ordinance nullifies my First Amendment right to the free exercise of my religion," she says of the proposal.

According to Bloss, COST has about 30 members working to educate people about the possible ramifications of enacting the ordinance in question.

One, says Bloss, is opening business owners up to assorted legal battles. She gives the exam-

ple of business owners being sued under the sexual orientation provisions of the anti-discrimination ordinance by individuals they may not have even realized were homosexuals.

"Even if this does not happen here, the machinery is in place, providing a chilling effect on existing business. Is council convinced that fear of frivolous lawsuits will not discourage business development in Ypsilanti?" she asks.

According to City Clerk Robert Slone, Ypsilanti council passed a resolution asking the city attorney and the clerk to review existing Ypsilanti ordinances which forbid discrimination against gay people in housing and in obtaining city contracts worth more than \$2,000.

A three-person council subcommittee has been formed to draft the new ordinance, and the police and fire chiefs have been asked to give a report on apparent crimes against the groups mentioned in the proposed ordinance. That report is due out later this month.

Both principles and politics are at work.

Montgomery says that as seen in other Michigan cities, the question can become who can mobilize the most supporters.

"The ability and power that the radical right has to organize is brought to bear on these ordinances," he says.

Opponents of a similar ordinance in Grand Rapids tried to organize a referendum but failed in 1994. Opposition in Lansing was successful last year, where an ordinance lost in a referendum vote.

Rowe says there has been talk of a referendum effort in Ypsilanti in the event the ordinance is adopted.

"I don't think the gays and lesbians realized how strongly some of these people feel about this. ... Even if council passes an ordinance, it may not be over yet," says Slone.

He says the process leading up to a final ordinance could take at least two months.

Lisa Martino is a Metro Times staff writer.



"Everybody has the right to be refused," says Rev. Wesley Rowe.

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