

Art Owens: 'We had to rid ourselves of quite a few ...'

Testimony of Art Owens, president of Sports & Health Club Regarding Gay Rights Bill - House File 109, House Judiciary Committee Hearing, April 11, 1984

"Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Arthur Owens. I'm president of Sports & Health Club. We have six locations in the Twin Cities area. We've been in business over 23 years, and up until about eight years ago, the sexual preference or homosexuality in our particular business was not a problem.

In 1970 we opened LaSalle Court Sports & Health Club, and subsequently it became kind of a haven for some of the homosexuals in downtown Minneapolis. My first awareness of it was when we started to get calls from our members telling me about the activity of the homosexuals and the gay group in our downtown location.

Well, I didn't pay too much attention at the beginning, but as we started to lose business and people started to drop out, because this was their most convenient location, we looked into it and sure enough, there was quite a group down there and they were not using necessarily the other five locations.

We sent one of our managers down at that point to try to straighten it out, and we had to rid ourselves of quite a few before they realized we were not prejudiced against gays or the homosexuals as long as they did not practice their perversion in the Sports & Health Club. And if they continued to practice it they would be minus their membership.

And after quite a few were let go, the others started to straighten up, and last Friday I was down for evaluation, and again at the LaSalle Sports & Health Club with some of our staff people and they mentioned that they had just again took memberships away from two more that continued to display their sexual preference in an open way.

I agree with what has been testified heretofore, and speaking from just a business point of view I can say that the outright, the outright expression of this openly, is repugnant to us as Christians and as Americans that are living in traditional standards. And we do lose business because of it and we will not be a party to it, even if it comes to the point that we have to close the place.

As you know, Minneapolis has a law like that, we have never been challenged on the Minneapolis law even though we are active in pursuing our particular part of it, I don't know why that is, but we will not as businesspeople consider that preference in acting out in our particular place of business.

Do you have any questions?"

Rep. Staten: "Mr. Chairman, Sir, I guess two things: Number one, your business is already located in downtown Minneapolis, which is already covered by current ordinance, is that correct?"

Mr. Owens: "Yes, sir."

Rep. Staten: "Number two, I guess, what would the concerns that you have, that you've raised, have to do with this particular piece of legislation, since any public display in terms of public affection and so forth is not covered in this legislation? The acts that you've talked about that have occurred — nothing in this legislation would legalize that."

Mr. Owens: "The preference, the outright acting out of the preference and as you read the San Francisco

experience, it's a step by step process. That is, again we have five locations not in downtown Minneapolis. We would be, as I understand this bill, and I haven't read it in its entirety, but as I understand it, we would be obligated to hire homosexuals if somebody could prove that they met all the other criteria. With us, obviously, they could not meet the other criteria, and so they would not be hired by us. But I'm not speaking only from a business point of view, but as a representative of those I know that are in business, that feel that the person that pays the rent is probably the one that should set the climate, or the moral climate in the business."

Rep. Cohen: "Mr. Chairman, Sir, if I'm not mistaken, aren't you the individual or wasn't it your business that there was considerable amount of publicity about in regard to employment practices that were found by some people to be discriminatory that had nothing to do with homosexuality?"

Mr. Owens: "Yes, sir."

Rules for 'Sodomites'

Non-Discriminating areas

Activity by Sodomites or normal people that is not morally or socially acceptable in the Sports & Health Club environment.

- Examples:
1. Immodest attire
 2. Making out in the club.
 3. Harassment of another member—male or female.

Discriminating Areas

We won't allow Sodomites to advertise their perversion, and set the tone of the Sports & Health Club to indicate a homosexual environment, or allow our reputation to be damaged by becoming known as a "Sodomite pick up joint."

- Examples:
- A. Male and female may hold hands and not be offensive to normal society and our members. Sodomites would not be allowed to hold hands as this would be offensive by normal and socially acceptable standards.
 - B. Loitering in the workout area with other Sodomites for social reasons rather than the purpose of work out.

We will not allow Sodomites to create an environment that promotes homosexuality and makes normal members feel uncomfortable or reduces their enjoyment of the club.

- Examples:
1. Loitering and congregating in the club that makes the normal member feel threatened. Sodomites gain their strength in numbers. Past cases include "I-eye balling" normal male members.
 2. Making sexually insinuating comments and 3-trying to pick up normal people. 4-Trying to recruit new Sodomites.

Sodomite congregating is stopped because they have a different motive than two normal people talking. They have a common bond in perversion and want to promote it in our club. This common bond is not present when normal people may congregate in the club.

The Sodomite situation is especially dangerous to our business because of the nature of the health club. Normal people can be made to feel uncomfortable very easily because of physical environment such as locker rooms, saunas, etc.

For example we would not allow co-ed shower facilities because of the obvious sex implications. People would be eyeballing members of the opposite sex, both sexes would feel uncomfortable, etc. Reunions are so obvious its foolish to expand on it.

Although not quite the same, the Sodomites create a similar problem. Our normal members can now be made to feel uncomfortable in their own locker room, sauna and even in the workout room.

We try to cut off problems before they arise by discouraging excessive congregating and loitering of the Sodomites. This is a judgement call we have to make as to when the Sodomites purpose for being in the club starts shifting from working out to setting a homosexual tone and environment to the club, we land on them like a duck on a junebug.

By not imposing the above rules we would —

1. Have a damaged reputation
2. Reduce enjoyment of club for most members
3. Lost income to club
4. Loss of membership sales

The offensiveness of Sodomite action and financial loss to the club does not change because Minneapolis now classifies those involved as a "minority."

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Misusing Christian tenets

By Morris L. Floyd

It has been a long time since I was voluntarily in a setting where I was continuously being referred to as a pervert. But this is what I did on two recent Wednesday evenings when I attended the hearings on Don Potter's discrimination complaint against the Sports and Health Club, Inc. At least half of seven hours' hearing time was filled by one witness after another for the Sports and Health Club recounting the sins—real and imagined—of gay club members present and past.

Born-again Christians all, they described what they considered to be the perversions of gay men: masturbation in the sunroom and sauna, holding hands, kissing, and (horror of horrors) talking in an audible tone about lovers and boyfriends. Pruriently gleeful tones of voice belied expressions of embarrassment in having to talk about such matters in public.

Acknowledging that the complainant in this case was not guilty, so far as they knew, of any of these perversions while on the club premises, it was clear they thought these faults to be inherent in the "homosexual" personality.

The fact that heterosexual men have also been known to masturbate, to "make out" with their partners, and even talk about their girlfriends in public was irrelevant to these true believers. Heterosexual men and their behaviors are "normal," while ours are "perverted." They supplied

Testimony

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Rep. Vanesek: "We seem to be drifting..."

Rep. Cohen: "Mr. Chairman, it will take a minute... You indicated that if you were not, if you didn't have a certain belief in the Gospel, I assume that's what, the New Testament?"

Mr. Owens: "That's the whole Bible — 66 books, all woven together into one book — written by some 40 writers over some 1400 years with one author."

Rep. Cohen: "Mr. Chairman, I guess when we talk about the Old versus the New Testament, I don't accept, the New Testament as my Gospel, because I happen to be Jewish. Does that mean I couldn't be employed by you?"

Mr. Owens: "No sir, but if you were

mented their testimony by passing out copies of the Bible and of religious tracts like "The Gay Blade" and "The Four Spiritual Laws."

"DON'T LET IT HAPPEN TO YOUR CITY," urges one pamphlet. If not stopped now, it warns, gays will take over Minneapolis as they have taken over San Francisco, where "Dread Disease... Propaganda in the schools... Gay sex in public... Hamstrung police..." are now commonplace.

The health club's defense against Don Potter's discrimination complaint is more than just an attempt to avoid being found in violation of the law or having to pay damages. It is a part of the fundamentalist Christian effort to undermine the effectiveness of the civil rights ordinance. It is no coincidence that Arthur Owens, president of the Sports and Health Club, took his Bible to St. Paul last year and enjoined legislators against adding lesbians and gay men to the classes protected by the state human rights statute. The effort is also evangelistic, an attempt to "liberate" us from our "bondage to homosexuality" through the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ."

This misuse of the tenets of Christian faith is for me personally the most offensive aspect to the whole case. I shudder when I think how my friends in this community will be

antagonistic to Christ as the messiah, and you openly professed this, and became a problem within our company, you could not be hired by us. If you were not openly antagonistic, you could be hired by us, just so you know where we're coming from and we know where you're coming from."

Rep. Cohen: "Mr. Chairman, just for the record, Jews do not believe that Christ is the messiah. I'm not antagonistic toward that belief if others hold it, but it's not my belief."

Mr. Owens: "I realize, sir, that when you say Jews you're trying to say that all the Jews. Remember that Jesus was a Jew, salvation comes from the Jews, all our first disciples, apostles, were Jews, and so we have to realize that there's a difference between the Jews, and those that hold to the belief of Abraham, father Abraham in faith. So there is a difference. Many completed Jews today are professing Jesus Christ, and there is a very active movement to try to reach the Jewish community with the truth."

spend when they hear that language. It reinforces those who think these warped understandings are reflective of what all Christians believe. It saddens me that what is offered as "Good News" has become very bad news for most gays and lesbians.

Many gay men continue to patronize the Sports and Health Clubs. When asked why, they give various reasons: they have a contract to fulfill; Sports and Health has some of the best facilities in town; if you just mind your own business and work out you won't have any trouble.

But I can't help wondering what it would be like if all those gay membership dollars went somewhere else. Perhaps another health club would use the money to upgrade their equipment and would welcome openly gay members. If straight men are intimidated by the presence of gay men talking about their lives, then maybe those men should be left to their narrow existence. Perhaps La Salle Court Sports and Health Club can remain profitable without its gay members... or perhaps not.

As long as gay men and their friends continue to give their money to businesses like the Sports and Health Club, they are cooperating in and supporting homophobic oppression. There must be a better alternative.

Rochester GLCS Workshops

On Thursday, October 11, Gay and Lesbian Community Services of Rochester, MN., will hold three sessions on "Myths About Homosexuality" at 9 a.m., 10 a.m., and 2 p.m., and a workshop on "Coming Out" at 6:30 p.m. The sessions will be held at Rochester Community College and are free and open to the public.

On Saturday, October 13, from 9 a.m. to noon a "Coming Out" workshop will be held from both gay and non-gay perspectives. For location call GLCS (507) 281-3265 Mon. or Wed. 5 p.m.-7 p.m.

On October 13, GLCS of Rochester will hold their 4th Anniversary dance at the Unitarian-Universalist Church, Walden Ln., Rochester. \$3.00, BYOB, semi-formal attire suggested.

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