

Anti-gay messages spur debate

Hearings look at rights law

ADRIENNE TANNER
Journal Staff Writer

Edmonton

Before he hit the play button, Mark Joslin warned everyone at the Alberta Human Rights Commission hearings they would probably find the tape offensive.

But few were prepared for the ensuing stream of spite.

The voices were different, but the messages from these Edmontonians were the same. Caller after caller expressing deep-seated hatred toward gays and lesbians.

"It's real simple. You put them all in a building together. That way they can give each other AIDS and gradually get rid of the whole damn bunch," one man said.

"I hate fags, they should be killed and put on an island," said another.

The calls were just a few of hundreds Joslin recorded last summer in response to an art project which publicly displayed pictures of same-sex couples to raise awareness about the role of gays and lesbians in the family.

The tape, says Joslin, shows exactly why the human rights commission is so important. Gays and lesbians are under fire and must be protected in the Individual's Rights Protection Act, he said.

"I can tell you, as an Albertan, I don't want my children raised in an environment of hate," Joslin said.

Terry Garrett, an inner-city church pastor, sees the matter differently.

Including sexual orientation in the act will open the door to child abuse and have disastrous effects on traditional families.

"I oppose racism and bigotry. But I do not believe the freedom of Albertans to choose sexual preference is an inalienable right."

The presentations were part of the commission's comprehensive public review of human rights issues.

Former chief commissioner Fil Fraser said the commission must be freed from political interference and brought in line with the spirit of the Charter of Rights. And that means including sexual orientation,

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The debate over including sexual orientation in Alberta human rights law dominated the first afternoon of hearings, which are slated to continue for three days.

This issue prompted the provincial government to call for a review of the commission, said civil rights lawyer Shirish Chotalia.

"I'm concerned about this very review process."

It may be an attempt by the provincial government to undermine the commission, she said.

Provincial law already prohibits discrimination based on such factors as race, religion, gender, disability, age and ancestry.

Jack O'Neill, who heads the human rights commission and is chairing the hearings, said he doesn't believe the commission is in danger.

Albertans put forth a massive show of support when suggestions to dismantle it were floated last year, he said.

O'Neill said he hopes to learn much from the presenters and improve services to Albertans. He singled out Mary Burlie's presentation as one good example.

Burlie is an outreach worker at the Boyle Street Co-op, an inner city social service agency.

She said her clients are primarily single native mothers.

"Women, particularly poor women, don't have a voice. They don't know what human rights are," she said.

The commission should leave its office tower and hit the streets to help those who need it most. Burlie