

Michigan faces choice to welcome or drive away

August 29, 2008

BY HANS JOHNSON

Later this month, I return to Kalamazoo for the first time in a few years. Coming back is inspiring and unsettling at the same time. Accounting for the uplift is the chance to reconnect with former classmates, church friends and family. The source of the upset is the second-class status of gay people and their partners in my home state.

The demeaned position of thousands of Michigianians who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender stems in part from a continuing attack by the political far right. Their tiresome crusade to turn ostracism into the official state policy reached another pinnacle this spring with a ruling by the Michigan Supreme Court barring domestic benefits for the committed same-sex partners of educators and other public-service workers.

The outcome dealt the state's image a black eye. "We are the worst of the worst of the worst when it comes to civil rights for same-sex couples," one advocate of the benefits told Detroit's Free Press in the wake of the ruling. Making such backward steps possible is an unholy alliance between anti-gay activists and the state's top lawyer. Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox pushed the benefits case onto the high court's docket and celebrated its outcome.

In 2001, I was among Kalamazooans who rallied city voters to reject a far-reaching and mean-spirited ballot measure aimed at denying human rights to gay people and health care coverage to the partners of city workers. The coalition that defeated that proposal crossed party lines, as well as boundaries of class, race, faith, education and neighborhood. In debates and on Election Day, we literally looked the sponsors of intolerance in the eye and triumphed at the ballot box by a margin of nearly 4 to 3.

But just three years later, state voters approved an anti-gay measure that put a hex on the spirit of inclusion, fair play and even community self-governance. This was the policy, sponsored by far-right groups, that Cox leveraged to secure the ruling from the state's high court forbidding the extension of benefits to committed partners. In keeping with the will of city voters, Kalamazoo fought to preserve its right to offer the benefits.

I am proud that my hometown is on record rejecting the politics of fear and division, that Kalamazoo stood up for its ability to contract with, reward and recognize workers and their partners as it wishes. This message of respect, inclusion and empowerment is exactly the image that Michigan needs to send the nation and the world in its quest to overhaul a faltering economy and overcome the anxieties that go with it.

Adding to the dangers of giving legal force to religious arguments subjecting a group of people to prejudice and scorn, the small-time anti-gay campaign poses big-time economic risks for the state. Visiting students and would-be movers to the state, beware! Those who are or who value gay people would find the welcome mat replaced with a no-trespassing sign. Such intolerance deprives the state of ingenuity and contributions that would otherwise enrich its future.

For those of us from the state, the option to stay or return comes with wariness about the unfriendly conditions and unequal treatment that we, our partners and families might endure. For many, it also comes with leeriness about the obligation to enlist in a political fight to defend one's own integrity, which can exact a great toll.

My partner and I have seen the recent ad campaign proclaiming Michigan's "upper hand" in economic development, with a qualified work force poised to deliver productivity. Coming back

this month to show him around, I want to believe that slogan but know that it comes with an invisible asterisk. Gay people are not a treasured part of the state work force and are not truly welcome.

Having put down roots elsewhere, I still support my city and my friends who have stayed in the state to fight for fairness. I'll rejoice with them when Michigan makes real the promise of its message, when the welcome mat returns for everyone, and when equality, and not discrimination, regains the upper hand.

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