

HOME

- MAINEJOBS
- HOMES
- WHEELS
- MARKETPLACE

NEWS

- Local and State
- Midday/4PM Reports
- AP Wire
- Base Closings
- InDepth
- Week in Photos

WEATHER

- 5-day Forecast
- On the Ocean

SPORTS

- High Schools
- Red Sox
- Sea Dogs
- Running

BUSINESS

- News
- Doghouse Kitchen
- Virtually Organized
- Maine News Direct
- Classifieds

ENTERTAINMENT

- Calendar
- Movies
- Dining
- Music
- Theater
- Art

TRAVEL

- Maine Regions
- From Away
- Vacation Rentals
- Lodging Guide

OUTDOORS

- Fishing
- Hiking
- Paddling Trips
- With Children
- Campground Guide

BLOGS

- Food for Thought
- Doghouse Kitchen
- Trail Head
- More blogs

20 BELOW

- Teen Blogs
- 20 Below 20
- Bulletin Board

MAINEJOBS

- Search Jobs
- Post a Job
- News and Resources
- Employer Profiles

HOMES

- Classifieds
- Advice and Info
- Featured Agents
- Moving to Maine
- Retiring in Maine

WHEELS

- Classifieds
- Resources and Info
- Featured Dealers

MILESTONES

- Celebrations
- Obituaries

MARKETPLACE

- Classifieds
- Special Sections

ADVERTISING

- 5 Reasons
- Advertising Products

HELP CENTER

- Press Herald
- Sunday Telegram
- Kennebec Journal
- Morning Sentinel
- MaineToday.com

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- NEWS
- SPORTS
- OBITUARIES
- VIEWPOINTS
- WHAT'S HAPPENING
- CLASSIFIEDS

Thursday, March 24, 2005

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Gay rights argued before legislators

By SUSAN M. COVER
Staff Writer

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AUGUSTA -- Martin Ripley said he's lost jobs because he's gay.

Hall Willkie and Thomas Craverio said they were denied a room at a bed-and-breakfast because they are gay.

And Michele Duval said she had to send her daughter to a private school to protect her from harassment because she was thought to be a lesbian.

Gay men and lesbians told their stories -- some with tears in their eyes as they recalled hateful words -- to a legislative committee on Wednesday, as the Legislature conducted a hearing on a bill that would give them protection from discrimination.

"When my co-workers realized I was gay, the threats started," said Ripley, of Augusta. "I even had death threats such as, I would be 'found floating in the river' or 'found in a tank' or, 'You never know what's going to fall out of the bulkhead.' "

The Christian Civic League said Tuesday it would not participate in the legislative hearing, calling it a "travesty of democracy." The league, and many of those who testified against the bill, feel strongly that citizens should be the ones to decide the issue.

Despite the group's absence, several people testified against the bill.

Some called it a moral issue,

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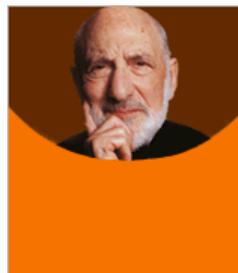


Monique Lucarelli, M.D.
An hospitalist, has been appointed to the Central Maine Medical Center Medical Staff.
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Abdominal Screenings
CMMC will offer a free screening for a relatively common but potentially life threatening condition known as abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) on September 10.
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Sirus Hamzavi, M.D.
An ophthalmologist, has been appointed to the Central Maine Medical Center Medical Staff.
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Red Hot Mamas
Two Lewiston physicians will be the featured speakers on September 14 at the premiere meeting of a women's support group new to the region.
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saying the state has no right to legitimize what they feel is immoral behavior. Others felt the ultimate decision on the bill should be made by the public, since Maine voters have twice rejected similar measures.

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Gov. John Baldacci submitted a bill that would add gays and lesbians to the designated protected classes in the Maine Human Rights Act, so they would have protection from discrimination in employment, credit, housing, public accommodations and education.

More than 150 people came to the Judiciary Committee's hearing on the bill Wednesday.

The committee will vote on the bill today in work session.

Opponents argued that gays and lesbians don't need protection.

"Sexual behavior is not comparable to race or ethnicity, because the former involve invisible feelings and voluntary actions while the latter involves innate characteristics," said Charla Bansley, state director of Concerned Women for America of Maine.

Bansley went on to say that, since some have changed from homosexual to heterosexual, it proves that sexual orientation is a choice.

Supporters of the bill included many of those in positions of power in state government, including bill sponsor Sen. Karl Turner, R-Cumberland; Senate President Beth Edmonds, D-Freeport; Sen. Michael Brennan, D-Portland; Attorney General Steven Rowe; and Kurt Adams, Baldacci chief counsel.

But the most compelling stories came from those who spoke of workplace harassment and the fear of going to school because of taunts from other kids.

George O'Brien, 27, of Cumberland said he endured harassment at a lumber company from co-workers who hated him because he is gay. His testimony included graphic descriptions and foul language.

One man often asked him: "What are you doing on my forklift, you fag?"

Adam Flanders, 18, of Belfast told lawmakers he had to change high schools after facing anti-gay harassment.

"'Faggot,' 'queer' and plenty of other words I won't repeat were hurled at me constantly," he said. "The hostility of my peers was bad enough, but even teachers turned their backs to what was happening."

Opponents challenged those stories, saying the committee has a responsibility to request the personnel files of those who were fired to prove that their dismissals weren't work-related.

Elaine Graham of Farmington said she didn't feel it was appropriate to hold the hearing during Holy Week.

Maine is the only state in New England that doesn't have such a law on the books.

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Q. Which type of cloud is highest in the atmosphere?

- Altostratus
- Cirrus
- Cumulus

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