



Campaigning for Gay Rights With a Focus on Families

The Politico
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[4/5/07]

This Friday night, Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of the Family Pride Coalition, might have some company when she camps out on the Ellipse for tickets to the annual White House Easter Egg Roll. If the weather isn't too cold, she plans to take along her partner, Cheryl Jacques, and their 5-year-old twin sons, Thomas and Timothy.

"I've told her that's the closest she'll ever get me to real camping," said Jacques, a gay rights activist who was president of the Human Rights Campaign.

This year's expedition to the White House is the couple's second. Last year, they and about 100 other members of the coalition attended one of the city's most beloved -- and family-oriented -- events on the president's lawn. They wore rainbow-colored leis to identify themselves. The occasion was peaceful enough, given the media attention and nasty e-mails the organization's plan attracted. Only a few anti-gay protesters showed up, Chrisler said. "The vast majority of the people we talked to were welcoming."

Family Pride came for the fun of it, but also to raise awareness that gay men and lesbians are parents, too. Chrisler, 36, said the event was sponsored partly to show the public that gay parents are just like everyone else, "paying taxes and driving their kids to school and soccer practice." Keeping gay families visible and representing them well to society and the media is part of what the coalition is about. It is unique among national gay rights organizations because it focuses on families. All parents, regardless of their sexual orientation, are concerned about education and having a safe and healthy environment in which to raise their children, she said.

Started in 1979 by a group of gay fathers, the advocacy organization has 35,000 member families and eight employees. Chrisler and the staff travel to the states, meeting with partners and training parents to lobby on an array of issues from adoption rights to marriage. Family Pride also works with other like-minded organizations to promote policies on the federal and state level that benefit gay families.

Marriage has been a lightning-rod issue since Chrisler and Jacques' home state of Massachusetts started marrying gays in 2004. In the 109th Congress, Republicans introduced nine pieces of legislation that would have limited marriage to a union between a man and a woman. Although Massachusetts remains the sole state where gays may marry, Vermont, Connecticut and New Jersey allow them to form civil unions.

Marriage gives a gay family more security than a civil union does, Chrisler explained. There isn't even a general understanding in society of what civil unions are. "You get married," she added, "not civil-unioned."

It was tough to be a gay family rights advocate in Republican-controlled Washington. Chrisler said first lady Laura Bush's welcome to the Easter Egg Roll last year was really the first olive branch the administration has ever offered her community. Even Vice President Cheney, the expectant grandfather of a child with two mothers, has not softened his position on what constitutes a family, she said.

"This administration has used gay and lesbian people to further their push for political power," she said.

But times are changing. A number of vocal anti-gay lawmakers such as former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum lost their seats in last year's election, which ushered in a Democratic majority in both chambers that is more responsive to gay interests. "You don't have the same level of vitriol coming out of Congress anymore," she said. Chrisler said that prejudice against gay people may always be a challenge. "Like all civil rights movements, I'm not sure it will ever be over," she said. But she is hopeful that in her lifetime gay people might achieve their legal goals, such as the right to marry and adopt children.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said Chrisler and the Family Pride Coalition have helped dismantle the myth that gays are single and can't raise happy, well-adjusted children.

"She's an amazing leader and has done a remarkable job focusing public attention on the needs of gay and lesbian families," he said.

Chrisler has worked in politics and gay advocacy most of her adult life, first as a staffer in the Massachusetts state Senate, where she worked for the woman she would later marry. When Jacques ran for Congress in 2001, a pregnant Chrisler headed her fundraising efforts. Jacques lost, and Chrisler then took a job raising money for the Freedom to Marry Coalition of Massachusetts.

In 2004, the family moved to Washington, and Jacques took the top job at the Human Rights Campaign. They got married that year in Boston, the day after the 2004 Democratic National Convention ended, taking advantage of the freedom that Jacques helped secure during her time in the state Senate, when she worked to block a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. After the wedding, the couple honeymooned somewhere slightly less romantic for them: the Republican National Convention, where Jacques had to be for work.

Chrisler took the helm of Family Pride in 2005. She said the motivation for her work is not political, but personal: Timothy and Thomas. Much like the grass-roots-lobbyist parents she works with, Chrisler wants her children to grow up in a society that accepts their family.

"The reason we're doing it is for them," she said.