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CITIZEN LOBBYIST

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A straight woman's appeal for gay rights

By DANIEL STURM

Maureen "Sue" Tormey Eisman hadn't planned to return from her new retirement home in Florida until April. But when the Mason resident received an e-mail action alert, calling for volunteers to fight the anti-gay marriage resolution in the Michigan legislature, Eisman booked a flight to Lansing to lobby in solidarity with her gay and lesbian friends.

"I've come back to change some people's minds," she said.

The 57-year-old woman spent the day at the state Capitol last week, fighting against Republican Sen. Alan Cropsey's measure to limit marriages in Michigan to heterosexual couples and to ban civil unions for same-sex couples. Although herself heterosexual, Eisman feels strongly about the issue of gay rights.

When the Triangle Foundation, the American Friends Service Committee and other gay and lesbian rights groups organized an emergency lobby day at the state Capitol Feb. 11, Eisman said she just had to take part.

The retired Montessori high school teacher said she feels a special commitment to the Triangle Foundation, an organization which she credits with having given her life back to her. Her first husband, Ron Hamilton, turned out to be gay. She remained good friends with Hamilton, a Detroit high school librarian, after their separation in 1974. Then, in 1984, at age 41, her ex-husband was murdered at his home in Detroit. Wayne State University Professor Phillip Traci, a gay acquaintance of Hamilton's, was murdered the same day.

The Triangle Foundation helped Eisman in her appeal to the gay community, for assistance in helping law enforcement officials with information for the case. "They took it upon themselves to help me solve the case. They were there for me 24 hours a day," Eisman recalls. Although the murderer was never officially found, Eisman is convinced she knew the man, who she believes died of AIDS three years ago.

Today Eisman is remarried and has two children and six grandchildren. She says that it was this personal tragedy that made her become an activist for gay rights. It also changed the life of her second husband, Gerald Eisman, an attorney who practices law in Florida. Eisman said her husband had always been "gay-friendly," but became more actively supportive as a result of the murder case. This support was strengthened further when her husband's own brother came out as a gay man during this period.

Eisman was one of 60 gay marriage supporters to lobby their state representatives and senators to oppose Senate Joint Resolution E and House Joint Resolution U last Wednesday.

If passed by a two-thirds vote in both chambers of the legislature, the bill will be placed on the ballot this November. Michigan residents would then be asked to vote on whether to change the state Constitution to include a clause that will effectively ban marriage among gay and lesbian couples and prevent local governments from recognizing same-sex domestic partner benefits. Such benefits are offered to employees by the governments of Ann Arbor, Detroit and Kalamazoo, and state universities such as MSU. "There are 1,400 state and federal benefits that I as a married woman have. Our rights should be alike," Eisman said.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, which is headed by Cropsey, is expected to hold hearings on the bill soon. The resolution has sufficient support in both the House and the Senate to be reported out of committee.

Here is a diary of Eisman's day of lobbying:

Feb 11, 10:30 a.m.

Eisman's day at the Capitol began with a brief teach-in organized by Triangle Foundation policy director Sean Kosofsky. The director suggested that activists think of key points to raise during their discussions with legislators. He advised them to target lawmakers most likely to be flexible. Lawmakers who hadn't made up their minds on the gay marriage ban were marked with a star on a paper handed out to lobbyists. "We absolutely have the opportunity to defeat this vicious, mean, evil and nasty issue," Kosofsky told a fired-up crowd. "But it's going to take days like this and constant letters," he warned. "We shall not rest because we think we have the votes."

Kosofsky said that marriage licenses cannot legally be granted to same-sex couples anywhere in the United States, and that Michigan has already banned such marriages, and does not honor those performed in others states or countries. Despite these already existing state prohibitions, and two federal bans on same-sex marriage, Cropsey and the American Family Association of Michigan seem convinced that yet another legal ban is necessary, Kosofsky said.

11:30 a.m.

The House of Representatives would not meet until 1 p.m, and so Eisman decided to start her lobby work on the second floor, where the Senate had begun its morning session. She filled out a form letter requesting a meeting with Sen. Dennis Olshove (D-Warren), knowing that it wouldn't be easy to persuade him to vote against the gay marriage bill.

Eisman didn't appear nervous while waiting for Olshove. Her father, John Tormey, had been a judge and a state public service commissioner, after all. She said he had taught her not to judge a person she did not know well. "[Fairness] is in my blood," she said.

When Olshove finally came out into the hallway, Eisman told him she was very concerned about the fact that some Michigan lawmakers were moving towards a constitutional ban on gay marriages. She gave Olshove a three-page letter, laying out her reasons for supporting same-sex marriage. As one paragraph of the letter read: "Until recently I have never had to deal with the idea that some people feel I may be better, different than my same sex counterparts when it comes to love, marriage, family."

She asked the senator to take a closer look at the benefits married couples enjoyed and to consider changing his mind. "How would your personal life change if gays and lesbians were allowed to marry nationwide, worldwide? There is nothing in my life that would be altered by allowing these people equal rights under the law."

Olshove replied that many negative attitudes towards the gay community have vanished over the last 30 years, and that he sensed more tolerance now "to a certain degree." However, he stressed that he didn't believe it was the right time for a more progressive legislation, since he didn't have enough support from his constituents to justify "the big move."

Noon

We walked from the Capitol to the Anderson Building, where the state representatives have their offices. On the way, Eisman told me she was unsurprised that Olshove wasn't more supportive. "There was no star next to his name."

Now in the elevator on the way up to the representatives' offices, she said that she didn't believe that the state of Michigan was unfriendly to the gay community. "Well, I take out Midland," she corrected herself. That's where the American Family Association of Michigan, the organization that lobbies against gay rights, is based. They're "downright hateful," said Eisman.

When I asked her why she thought the bill for a constitutional amendment has gained such support from legislators on both sides of the aisle even though there are gay Republican and Democrat state legislators in Michigan, she said most lawmakers are men and that men more often make decisions based upon fear for their careers. "Women are less likely to feel threatened," she said.

She also felt that President George W. Bush's support for faith-based initiatives and the Religious Right has probably encouraged conservative groups to voice their anti-gay agendas. But bashing gay and lesbian people in the name of religion is something the retired teacher called deplorable. "The religious right believes that marriage is sacred. Well, I got married in a courthouse. There's nothing sacred about that. I have all of the same rights, although I didn't go to a church. So it's clearly not a religious issue."

12:45 p.m.

By early afternoon, the volunteer lobbyist has visited a half dozen offices in the House of Representatives building, handing out literature from the Triangle Foundation and her own personal letter. The legislators were already gone for the day, for a photo shoot in the chamber followed by a legislative session. Still, Eisman managed to engage in a discussion with the legislative aide of one Democratic representative, who spoke sympathetically, but asked that his name be kept from the record. The aide said that "half of his siblings" were gay. Unfortunately, there was no question that his boss would vote in favor of the gay marriage ban, he said.

1 p.m.

On our way back to the State Capitol Eisman said it was sad to observe her gay friends' long struggle for an end to discrimination and to see that rather than supporting progress, legislators were pushing for yet another bill that would make gay marriage impossible.

One Lansing friend of hers has been together with his partner for 53 years, she said. He is 75 years old and worried about concerns affecting him in old age that relate specifically to the fact that his partner is not his legal spouse. A surviving gay spouse, for example, is often denied worker's compensation and the permission to make arrangements for a burial, among other things. If a couple wants to legalize their relationship, they will need to move to Vermont, where they can enter into a civil union, or Ontario, Canada, where they can marry. "But I don't want my friends leaving," Eisman said.

Eisman gave another example of a lesbian couple living in Lansing. "She wanted to put [her partner] into assisted living but lost her house because they weren't protected as a couple. The house was only in one of their names, and she lost it to pay for the care. There's no fairness."

1:15

Back in the Capitol, Eisman filled out a form letter to meet with Republican legislator Gary Woronchak. To lock in the representative, she wrote "Straight view" at the top of the form, beneath her name. She soon spotted the Dearborn congressman, who was immediately surrounded by other gay rights activists. "I'm coming from the straight angle, and I just don't get it why I have all these rights that my friends don't have," Eisman told the legislator. Woronchak responded, "Well, that's a much larger question than the actual item we might be voting on, whether we put into the bedrock of the Constitution something that's already in statute. Whether that's necessary, I'm not sure." The representative said he sees the issue from a "strictly government structure" point of view. "The Constitution is supposed to be the framework for how we operate government. And to put things like social issues into the Constitution is something we need to check here," Woronchak said.

Woronchak emphasized that he hasn't yet committed his vote either way.

Eisman said she enjoyed the discussion because the Dearborn lawmaker hadn't made up his mind. She said she

wasn't disappointed that Woronchak hadn't yet decided to oppose the gay marriage ban because she respected his thoughtfulness. "It's easy for me, because I've been spending time with gay people for decades. But if you haven't, this may be a real touchy subject." Eisman said she would spend the rest of the day writing e-mails from her Mason home and sending them to state legislators. Later this week she will travel to Ann Arbor to support another gay rights event. The day's experiences appear to have energized her. She seems tireless, in fact. "I want gay people to have every right I have. And until they do, I won't quit."

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