

# HUMAN RELATIONS NEWS

Oct./Nov./Dec. 2004

Newsletter of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations

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## L.C.H.R. Seeking a New Treasurer

Dr. Paul Y. Burns has expressed his intention to resign from his position as Treasurer of L.C.H.R. as of the Winter meeting of the Board. Paul had graciously volunteered to take the position in 2001, once again. He brought experience from past service in this capacity. Having reached the age of 84, Paul is seeking to cut back on the demands of his volunteer activity.

The duties of the Treasurer are not extensive. According to the by-laws of the organization they are "those that usually devolve upon that office. The Treasurer shall receive membership dues and contributions and shall provide the Membership Secretary with up-to-date addresses of members."

The L.C.H.R. has two accounts at the Liberty Bank & Trust in Baton Rouge, which is a minority-owned banking institution. There is a checking account and a money market certificate. Of course the treasurer will report quarterly on the account balances, serve as a signatory to checks and make deposits. Additionally, the secretary holds the file on incorporation and IRS matters.

If any member has been able to keep their own checking account in good order, they should be able to handle this job without difficulty. As an organization, we are thankful for the excellent job that Paul has done. We agree that such responsibilities should not extend on and on. We urge any member, and not necessarily those currently on the Board, to step up to the plate.



## FALL MEETING

The fall meeting of LCHR was hosted by Anthony and Dorothy Navarre, on Oct. 30th, at their Lafayette home. Their giant sofa was able to accommodate most of the board members in comfort. The Board is continuing to review and revise the Position Papers. New Position Papers are welcomed also. Toward the end of the meeting, Dr. Pat Rickels invited Elnur Musa, a native of Sudan, to comment on the human tragedy that has engulfed that nation. Mr. Musa decried the violence that has resulted in the "ethnic-cleansing" of the Darfur region, with massive numbers fleeing for their lives and forced to live on the edge of survival as refugees in remote, barren areas.

Following the meeting we enjoyed the sumptuous feast prepared by Anthony and

Dorothy. The next meeting of the Board will be held at the home of Dr. Pat Rickels in Lafayette on Jan. 8th.

## GAY MOM CASE RETURNS

Last spring an 8 year-old boy at Ernest Gallet Elementary School in Broussard, LA was disciplined by his teacher when he told a classmate that his Mom was gay. It became a 'cause celebre' as the reaction of the teacher conveyed censure of the child's family configuration. In the disciplinary write-up the boy was made to fill out as to why he was being disciplined he wrote "I sed bad wurdz"

The boys mother secured the help of the American Civil Liberties Union. The Superintendent and the School Board sought to protect the system and refused even the decency of an apology.

Now, to add insult (*turn*)



**GAY MOM CASE continued**

to injury, the teacher, Ms. Terry Bethea is suing the gay mother, Ms. Sharon Huff. Ms. Bethea retained the services of former state senator Max Jordan, who while in office, served as a point man for the religious right, and was a vitriolic opponent of any measure seeking inclusion and equal protection for gay and lesbian citizens. They demanded an apology from Ms. Huff under threat of a lawsuit for lying about the teacher's actions and thereby causing physical and emotional pain and suffering. Ms. Huff now is being sued for \$50,000.

This case is a classic example of "blaming the victim". A child innocently and accurately described the relationship of his mother, evoking a reaction by the teacher that was a not-so-subtle attempt to shame. When the mother stood up to this, she was rebuffed by the school system, and now is to be dragged into court and sued.

***Pedestrian Dangers***

*Cities in the South are among the most dangerous for pedestrians, according to an Associated Press story. Sprawling new cities are built with wide, high-speed roads that are especially dangerous for walking. This certainly seems to be the case in Baton Rouge and Lafayette. According to Anne Canby of the Surface Transportation Policy Project, roads are designed for cars, and cars alone. Wide roads, speeding traffic and a lack of crosswalks or sidewalks can make walking a deadly activity. There simply are not enough pedestrian facilities.*

*Regional differences are startling. Twice as many walkers die in New Orleans as opposed to Milwaukee. Walking is a very natural and healthy human activity, but the automobiles rule the road, which are designed exclusively for them.*

**POVERTY-A MORAL ISSUE**

The *Shreveport Times* had an editorial that was worth reprinting; and this was done on 11-27-04 by the *Daily Advertiser* of Lafayette.

"Dismissing the hot-button issues of abortion and same-sex marriage as only glittery sideshows that distract from larger national problems, misses the middle-America reality. Those issues really matter to folks in a visceral way. But that doesn't quell a desire to see the morality playing-field widening to include broader issues that affect more people on a daily basis than unwanted pregnancies and gay rights.

A couple dozen religious leaders last week kicked off the New Voices Campaign to lament a political landscape that is absent passionate discussions about issues such as poverty and crime. Indeed, the presidential bids of both President Bush and Sen. John Kerry were so busy appealing to the middle class that violence, inadequate housing, and vast education gaps, primarily in poor neighborhoods, got scant attention.

"When we listen to what poor people tell us about their experience, time after time, they talk about feeling invisible, forgotten and ignored by everyone", said the Rev. Robert Vitillo, director of the anti-poverty Catholic Campaign for Human Development. "It's almost as if they didn't exist" For sure, not many of them were on campaign contribution lists.

Surveys show that Americans are concerned about poverty, but less than with other issues. In a January survey by Vitillo's organization, Americans ranked poverty 13th, behind government, the economy, and terrorism. But the "New Voices" message should take hold readily in Louisiana where poverty is at the heart of most of our conundrums.

Only 10 states have a higher percentage of working poor. About 29 percent of Louisiana's households have income less than \$25,000 annually. Children in poverty total 23 percent compared to 16 percent nationwide.

The Rev. David Beckmann, *cont.*

President of Bread for the World, borrows from the Gospel of Matthew to challenge people of faith: "As God looks at U.S. politics, what we know is that God has a special interest in what's in this for the 'least of these'".



**WORLD AIDS DAY**

World AIDS Day was observed in many ways throughout Louisiana and the world on Dec. 1st. The theme this year was on protecting women and girls from infection. Nearly half of those effected worldwide are female. They are particularly vulnerable as they often live in poverty with very little options, and often lack the ability to insist on condom use by their male partners. Programs of the United Nations stress that gender inequality must be addressed through changes in laws so that domestic abuse and rape are treated as serious crimes and women have property rights that will allow them to have greater access to economic resources.

**TASER GUNS**

*There is increasing concern about the use of Taser stun guns by police departments in Louisiana. A man was killed in Jefferson Parish recently. In Lafayette Parish one was killed and another maimed this past year. Amnesty International reports that 74 people in the U.S. and Canada have died in the past 4 years after being shocked with stun guns. The manufacturer points out that death was usually attributed to drug overdose, (see next page)*

## Taser Guns, cont.

or by other physical factors, Nevertheless, these could have been aggravated by the effects of the stun gun such that a fatality resulted.

Taser guns work by sending a jolt of electricity through the body which interfere with the nervous system, in effect, scrambling the brain so that the body becomes paralyzed. When the charge is released, the body goes limp and the nervous system quickly regains control of disrupted pathways, and physical and cognitive functioning is restored.

Use of a Taser gun by the Lafayette Police Dept. has led to an FBI investigation and possible lawsuits. Kevin Alexander, age 27, claims he was shocked 17 times during an undercover drug sting. Mr. Alexander said that "it feels like needles, just billions ...of needles sticking in your body", As a result of the use of the taser, Mr. Alexander had to be taken to the hospital and now has burn scars on his back and neck where the gun was aimed.

This seems to be part of a growing trend to ignore the constitutional protection against cruel and unusual punishment and the American tradition of fair-play and abhorrence of torture in any form. Now the ends justify the means, and torture is just redefined. In senate hearings on the confirmation of Mr. Alberto Gonzales as the new Attorney General, it was brought to light that he had advised the Bush administration with memos that loosened the definition of torture where it was considered legally justified to apply techniques that result in physical and mental pain, just as long as there is no danger of killing the suspect.

Perhaps a case can be made that for law enforcement the Taser gun is safer than physical and armed confrontation with unpredictable outcome. Still, it seems the taser can be easily misused. When a suspect is impaired by other factors, the shock of the taser, can also have unpredictable and even fatal outcome. Are we on a slippery slope?



## Blanco Signs Discrimination Ban

***Gov. Kathleen Blanco has issued an executive order including sexual orientation in the ban on harassment or discrimination in state hiring and promotion. The order also requires private companies with state contracts to observe the discrimination ban, and it's force goes down to parish and local governmental bodies as well.***

***The inclusion of sexual orientation along with race, color, religion, sex, national origin, political affiliation, or disability, returns to the practice of state government under the executive order of 1992 by Gov. Edwards. However, Gov. Mike Foster dropped out sexual orientation during his tenure in office.***

***Joe Traigle of the Louisiana League for Equality applauded Blanco's move. "This is an extremely positive step forward for the state of Louisiana. It helps put Louisiana in a much more competitive position for jobs and investment. National and international companies want to invest money and send employees to a state that treats every citizen with dignity and respect. This executive order is a step in the right direction.***

## More on LA Poverty

While the issue of millions living in grinding poverty in the richest nation on earth may be barely visible on the radar screen of national politics, it is getting some attention from Gov. Kathleen Blanco. "While the statistics are bleak, hope is not dead" she stated at a 2-day "Solutions to Poverty" summit, held in Monroe in early December. The 800 attendees heard a litany of dismal data.

More than 750,000 Louisiana residents, or about 1 in 6, live in poverty. This makes Louisiana the 4th highest rated in the nation, according to current U.S. Census data. "We are all touched by poverty. Its continued existence should shame us" said Gov. Blanco. Also noted was that more than a quarter of all Louisiana children live in poverty. In East Carroll Parish, located in the northeast corner of the state it is more than half of all children..

Education was noted as a key indicator of economic status. One-fifth of the adult working-age population has less than a high school diploma, and most work in low-skill, low-paying jobs, if they are even working. Those who graduate from high school and college are more mobile, and often leave the state for higher paying jobs elsewhere.

While education rates are low, health care problems are very high in Louisiana. The numbers tend to worsen for black residents and women. Rep. William Jefferson noted that poverty tends to foster social problems such as drug abuse, crime, and domestic violence. These social and health costs fuel the rising costs of healthcare, municipal services, social services, and education initiatives. Jefferson noted that there is no 'quick fix' given the complexity of such problems.

The Summit grew out of 80 regional meetings, intended to generate recommendations for improvement. The Governor urged that suggestions focus not on "hand-outs", but instead, "ways to empower people to take control of their lives". The principal consultant suggested the state set a 20-year agenda of initiatives, By consistently addressing the issue over such a time-span, meaningful change is likely to emerge.

## *REMEMBERING MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.—JAN. 15*

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness, in a descending spiral of destruction”*

*“Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man’s sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true.”*

*“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather, the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club, without moral or spiritual authority.”*

*An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for the law.”*

*“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift, is approaching spiritual death.”*

*“Few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed.”*

*“In the final analysis the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied together. They entered the same mysterious gateway of human birth, into the same adventure of mortal life”*

## Faith-based Voting

Just prior to the November Presidential Election, Bill Decker, an editor of *The Advertiser*, Lafayette's paper of record, reminded readers that it is a scandal how unreliable the American system of election is in assuring that every person's vote actually is counted.

This election, most voters reached a point of nausea, with the relentless barrage of advertising for the candidates of both parties, using the most crude, manipulative, and negative pitches to sway the more gullible voters.

Decker noted in his editorial column that computerized voting is a reality in at least 34 states. It is now used here in Louisiana for absentee voting. However, almost none of these states provide a paper trail. He also noted the chief executive of the Diebold corporation, the leading manufacturer of the computerized voting machines, at a Republican rally, promised to deliver the election to the Republican column. Hopefully he was speaking figuratively, rather than literally. Another egregious example was in Ohio, where the secretary of state sent out voter registration forms on paper of a lighter weight than required by law. He then refused to accept the registrations that were returned.

The Electoral College system is a relic of the early years of the Republic, when voting was considered the privilege only of propertied white males. It can be widely out of sync with the will of the voters. It is a winner-take-all system and every once in a while an elector will exercise his

prerogative to vote for whomever they please, even though not the candidate of the party slate.

Decker's suggestions for change were to eliminate the Electoral College and let the popular vote elect the president (If this was the case, George Bush would have never gotten elected in the first place). Another was to make sure that computerized voting systems leave paper trails. Also the ballots should have a "no preference" option. If a voter leaves the booth without voting for anyone, there is a discrepancy between the vote numbers and the machine counts. He also suggests that state election officials be forbidden from campaigning for anyone except themselves. Decker's final remarks really hit the mark. "We've been reading a lot lately about the role that faith plays in the president's decision-making. Some say God is his co-pilot, and others say the president's faith is just another word for stubbornness. Either way, it's nothing compared to the faith that will be exhibited by millions of voters on Tuesday—faith that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, their votes will actually count."

## Court Ruling Awaited

Arguments were heard in early December before the State Supreme Court over the constitutionality of the so-called "Defense of Marriage" Amendment passed in September by the electorate by a nearly 4/5ths majority.

Challenges to the constitutionality of the Amendment were made prior to its going before the voters, but it was ruled that it could not be challenged until it was actually passed.

In a District Court ruling prior to the election, it was ruled that the Amendment's broad wording not only prevented any recognition of a same-sex marriage, but could easily be construed as preventing any legal status for common-law relationships and/or domestic contracts and partnerships between both gay and straight non-married couples.

John Rawls, attorney for Forum for Equality, contended that unhappy relatives could and would challenge wills and other contractual arrangements regarding property. According to the

Constitution, Amendments by ballot initiative must be narrowly written to pertain to only one definable objective.

State law has long defined marriage as between a man and woman. The purpose of the Amendment was an obvious attempt to mobilize rejection of changes that have opened up in a few states allowing limited recognition of same-sex relationships. Enshrining the ban in the Constitution was a way of giving gay and lesbian couples the message that there is an implacable opposition which intends never, ever to accord them the respect that heterosexual couples are free to enjoy, and the many legal advantages they have under the law. Any attempts to push social change through the courts would be frustrated. Therefore, the best that Louisiana gays and lesbians could hope for was that many decades hence, when a more tolerant era emerged, there would still be an uphill and expensive battle of trying to repeal an Amendment long enshrined in law and custom.



### REMINDER

**The Louisiana Council on Human Relations is solely dependent upon dues and donations from members and supporters.**

**Dues are: \$15 Annual**

**\$20 Family**

**\$1 Hardship**

**Make checks out to LCHR and send to Paul Y. Burns, Treasurer at:**

**2137 Cedardale Ave.**

**Baton Rouge, LA 70808**



## Abbeville Celebrates *The Louisiana Story: A photographic journey*

An outstanding exhibit is being shown at the Abbeville Historical and Cultural Alliance Center Museum and Gallery. It is a photographic exhibit that is on loan from the Imperial Calcasieu Museum in Lake Charles. It documents the making of an historic documentary film, which needs to be remembered, *The Louisiana Story*. It was directed by Robert Flaherty, a pioneer of the documentary form, and is a poetic evocation of the life of a Cajun boy growing up close to nature in the swamp, whose way of life is altered with the introduction of the technological majesty of the oil industry. The derrick roughnecks befriend the boy, and the boy engages in heroic exploits trying to catch an alligator. The filming was mainly done at Avery Island, but the crew lived and worked in Abbeville throughout the shoot in 1946-47. Abbeville then served as the site of the southern premiere of the film in 1949. Standard Oil sponsored the project and had outstanding photographers on their payroll go to Abbeville to record the movie-making in photos. Twenty-two large, high-quality photos serve as the core of the exhibit. During the course of the exhibit a DVD of the original *Louisiana Story* film will be available for viewing, as well as a video of *The Picture Show At Magdalen Square*, which is centered on the day of the 1949 premiere in Abbeville. It was performed in 1993 and 2000 by the Abbey Players. The musical is the work of Wade Russo, Abbeville native, now a prominent director of musical theater who lives in New York..

*The Louisiana Story* garnered several major film awards. Also the musical score won the Pulitzer Prize for composer Virgil Thomson, and remains one of his most effective and enduring works. Thomas was considered second only to Aaron Copland in bringing the American vernacular into symphonic music. The Acadiana Symphony Orchestra has performed excerpts from Thomson's score twice this season. They will be performing it again when their chamber ensemble performs in Abbeville on March 13th at the Abbeville High School Auditorium.

The exhibit can be seen at the Alliance Center

Museum and Gallery on State St. through Feb. 11th. Hours of the Museum/Gallery are M-F, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. It will then move to the Vermilion Parish Library on St. Victor St. where it will have more extended daytime hours and runs through March 30th.

The photos show a time and place so near, yet so far. Those who made the film are now dead and the little boy who was the central character is now a man in his 70's who lives quietly in Cameron Parish.

Bringing this exhibit to Abbeville has required the hard work and cooperation of many. It has been a labor of love for Elemore Morgan, Jr., a major Louisiana artist, now retired from U.L.L. A photo by his father is among those in the exhibit; the film is one he has loved since his youth. Mr. Morgan teamed up with Tony Mayard, curator for the Alliance Center Gallery, to make the arrangements to bring the exhibit to Abbeville. With the financial backing of the Centre Acadien, it became possible. Elemore treasures his memories of that time, place, and the film which captured it. From these shards of memory, comes the mystery of creation, and Elemore Morgan never tires of painting the wide-open landscapes of South Louisiana.

## TALLULAH DOCTOR BRINGS BROADWAY

We are accustomed to hear of the town of Tallulah in northeast Louisiana in connection with the infamous juvenile detention center that now, with the help of Sen. Don Cravins, has been shut down for good. Thus, it was refreshing to read a story out of Tallulah, in *The Advertiser*, about bringing Broadway musicals to northeast Louisiana. Dr. Raymond Poliquit is a native of the Philippine Islands who is now an American citizen. Following his graduation from med school, he turned down offers from across the U.S. to move to Tallulah, because it was a very poor parish where no pediatrician was in practice.

The one thing he missed in Tallulah was the Broadway musicals he loved to attend when he was attending med school. He made a 10 year effort, but it has paid off with Impresario's Choice, the organization that has contracted to bring touring Broadway productions to Monroe. They draw people from throughout northeast Louisiana to such shows as "My Fair Lady", "The Sound of Music", "CATS", "Ragtime" etc. Through Dr. Poliquit's efforts, students are exposed to the theater and receive pre- and post-performance educational offerings. Such community activism on behalf of the arts coming out of humble little Tallulah is certainly to be applauded!



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