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## "HATRED YOU'RE FACING HAS NO PLACE HERE"

By Celia Cohen  
Grapevine Political Writer

When the roll is called for the governors who took a stand for civil rights, Jack Markell will be there.

He answered the summons by endorsing a bill that would legalize civil unions for same-sex couples in Delaware, a commitment made more forceful because it was so public.

Markell, a first-term Democrat, was outside on the grand expanse of steps leading up to the east front of Legislative Hall in Dover.

He was there Tuesday afternoon for a press conference arranged by the bill's prime sponsors -- David Sokola, a Democratic senator from Pike Creek Valley, and Melanie George, a Democratic representative from Bear -- and although the sponsors spoke and other legislators spoke and there was a crowd cheering them on, nothing really mattered as much as Markell's presence.

Civil rights do not advance in this state without a governor.

In the widening vista for equal opportunity, unstoppable since the Greatest Generation looked homeward from World War II and saw life with new eyes, a governor has been there every time.

Democrat or Republican, the governors were essential to bringing about change. Bert Carvel and Russell Peterson on integration. Pete du Pont on the Martin Luther King holiday. Ruth Ann Minner and Jack Markell on gay rights.

As for the reverse, Charles Terry left the National Guard in Wilmington so long after the 1968 riots that the state became a laughingstock and he lost his re-election.

No involvement in civil rights was more dramatic than Carvel's. He had counted the votes in 1963 and knew there were enough to pass a public accommodations bill, integrating restaurants and similar public places, but he did not trust all the pledges he was given.

Carvel stationed himself outside the Senate chamber, and sure enough, a senator came sneaking out. He whined that his constituents would hang him if he voted yes.

"Hang and be damned!" Carvel thundered. The senator went back inside, voted yes, and the bill was on its way to becoming law.

Markell stood on the steps outside Legislative Hall and called for the passage of a civil union bill as a bar against intolerance.

"Hatred you're facing has no place here," Markell said.

"Let's be clear. Just two years ago, until we signed a law to change it, it was legal in Delaware to be fired because of your sexual orientation. Anti-gay and lesbian discrimination was legal simply because the law had not caught up to the times. Well, the time is here, and the time is now."

The crucial commitment from Markell came early.

"From Day One," said Lisa Goodman, the president of Equality Delaware, a new organization that is the driving force behind the civil union bill. "He told me personally and other people he was supportive when he campaigned for governor. He was a man of his word."

Goodman sounds confident there are enough votes to pass the bill. Soon.

Nor will it hurt to have friendly gavels in each chamber. Matt Denn, the Democratic lieutenant governor presiding in the Senate, and Bob Gilligan, the Democratic speaker presiding in the House of Representatives, want civil unions to be legalized.

It is a far cry from the silent treatment that surrounded the gay rights bill when it was introduced. Bill Oberle, who was a Republican state representative from a district south of Newark, was the only legislator willing to sign on as a sponsor.

The bill took a decade and a lot of heartache and recriminations to pass. By coincidence Oberle was in Legislative Hall on the day of the press conference, happy about so much progress.

The mood at the press conference was not quite fearless, but it was getting there. Douglas Marshall-Steele, long a leader in the gay rights movement here, waved a rainbow flag. People acted celebratory, cathartic, elated, maybe because of where it was.

In the open. Outside. Out.

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