

# Your voice is needed

## COMMENTARY

By Elizabeth F. Schwartz

Queer folks,  
pay attention:

Your community needs you! We take this time out from our regularly scheduled column – exploring the legal issues specifically facing the lesbian community – to

speak about a pressing issue facing all of us. We stand at a crossroads in determining the kind of community in which we will live, and you can make a real difference.

As you might remember, the Miami-Dade County Commission voted to deny initial consideration to amending the Human Rights Ordinance to include gays and lesbians in June 1997. On Nov. 5 we had a major victory: we won by one vote. This means we passed the first reading and go to the next level: public debate.

On Dec. 1 our Human Rights Ordinance is up for public hearing and a vote at the Miami-Dade County commission chambers. If we get seven out of the 13 county commissioners to vote in favor of adding "sexual orientation" to the list of protected classes, we will then be able to hold those responsible who discriminate against us in employment, housing, public accommodations and lending.

SAVE-Dade is the coalition of local organizations spearheading this effort. Yes, we have countless voices in support of this Ordinance from all walks of community life. But it is *you* and your loved ones that the law will protect. You are the real people behind the need for protection of gays and lesbians in Miami-Dade County. You must invest in this battle for yourself and those who will come after you. That is what community is all about.

One of the challenges we are faced with is *demonstrating the need for this ordinance*. We all know that discrimination against sexual minorities occurs in a variety of ways each day. Unfortunately, several county commissioners doubt that. They feel that, unlike race or gender, a person's sexual orientation can be taken on and off like eyeglasses. Contrary to what the religious right would like to believe, that is usually not the case.

It happens, but documenting the incidents of sexual orientation discrimination can be



extremely difficult since there are no protections on a county, state or federal level for us, victims are reluctant to come forward. There is undoubtedly a fear they will put themselves in greater jeopardy for no ultimate gain ("I've already been evicted. I could lose my job! Why bother? Why should I risk further insult?").

Also, there is the simple problem that we do not know where to turn to talk about these incidents of discrimination. Sadly, victims frequently call our law offices, but we are forced to give them the harsh news that no legal protections are provided in Miami-Dade County, except on Miami Beach. The Miami-Dade County Equal Opportunity Board, and its Federal sister, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have helped SAVE-Dade document the calls they have received, but, again, they have not kept detailed reports because there is nothing they can do absent amendment of the Human Rights Ordinance.

So, by now you get the problem. If you've been the victim of discrimination, you know it hurts. And, you're probably wondering what you can do to show these "no" votes that discrimination against us is rampant. Well, friends, *step forward*.

Tell us your stories by doing one or all of the following:

– Fill out the discrimination form on this page and send it to us.

– Email me at [eschwartz@sobelaw.com](mailto:eschwartz@sobelaw.com).

– Call 751-SAVE.

– Come to the Commission chambers Dec. 1 and share your story.

Unfortunately, most of us have experienced some degree of discrimination. It doesn't have to mean that you were evicted from your apartment or fired from your job. It doesn't have to mean that you were told on a job interview that "We don't hire your kind here." Discrimination can be subtle: creation of a hostile work environment, radical increases in rent unlike your neighbors, or disparate treatment in loan applications due

I am willing to tell my story to my Commission.