

NEWS

Eight Days in February: Madison and Wisconsin Ride an Emotional Roller Coaster with Hotel Washington Fire and Anti-Gay Marriage Bill

By John Quinlan



The Hotel Washington ablaze at about 6:30-7am Sunday morning February 18th.
Photo: Hotel Washington staff.

Madison — They were eight days in February that no one in Madison will ever forget.

On Monday, February 19th, hundreds of candles pierced the darkness, and the overwhelming warmth of a shared sense of community overcame the chill of a cold winter's night at a rally in the shadow of the State Capitol. Madison's LesBiGay community and its supporters had come together to mourn the loss of the Hotel Washington which had burned to the ground early on the morning before.

The historic hotel, which was celebrating its ninetieth anniversary, was now rubble. Early on Monday, the spindly brick facade was pushed down into the pile of debris which was all that remained of the hotel that had been home to the New Bar, Rod's, the Cafe Palms, the Club de Wash, the Barber's Closet, and numerous other establishments over the years.

While, miraculously, no one was hurt or injured in the fire, 12 people found themselves homeless, and 110 people were out of work. Losses were estimated to be in excess of \$2 million, most of

which would be covered by insurance, according to co-owner Greg Scheel.

Although arson was originally suspected by many in the community, fire officials had found no evidence to support that possibility as of press time. Hotel Washington staff say the fire was most likely accidental and seems to have originated in an area behind the Cafe Palms.



The remains of the Hotel Washington later that Sunday. Photo: Hotel Washington staff

Despite the catastrophe, the overwhelming feeling of all who gathered that Monday night at the Capitol was one of hope, of solidarity, and of newfound resolve to face the challenges that lie ahead.

For more than two hours, almost a hundred people took their turn at a microphone at the top of the steps near the State Street entrance to the Capitol. Each took a few minutes to reflect upon the week's events, to read poetry, to sing songs, and to pray.

They told stories filled with fond remembrances of experiences shared at the building which now lay in smoldering ruins. It was a place where many had first "come out," where others had met their life partners, and for virtually all, a place where friends and acquaintances had become family.

A VOW TO REBUILD

As hard as the previous day and a half had been for them, co-owners Greg Scheel and Sherry Nelson greeted the cheering crowd with arms spread wide and faces filled with optimism and gratitude. They spoke about the re-building they believed would inevitably come.

On Sunday and Monday, amidst the devastation, there had been small,

but significant symbols of hope. A Rainbow flag flew proudly from one of the few pieces of the structure that still stood. Among the few items that were recoverable was the week's payroll. Most significantly, boxes of photos and videotapes that recounted the history of the historic hotel had survived.

Scheel vowed that these pictures would one day hang on the walls of a new Hotel Washington, built on that same site. Discussions have already begun with an architect, and plans call for a four-story structure modeled closely after the floorplan of the late, beloved complex. To help in the effort, make checks payable to The Hotel Washington Rebuilding Fund, in care of the Associated Bank, 222 W. Washington Ave, Madison, WI 53703.

The evening rally at the Capitol began with the tragedy at the hotel as its focus, but, as the night proceeded, speaker after speaker echoed a common theme. A house had been lost, but the

sense of home that so many have found in Madison's LesBiGay community was stronger than ever.

It had been quite a week. Just one week before, Wisconsin's LesBiGay community came face-to-face with a threat that many could not believe would ever appear in Wisconsin — a piece of anti-Gay legislation. Many have felt cushioned against the kind of anti-Gay attacks prevalent in other states because, after all, Wisconsin is a state with a strong progressive tradition that passed the nation's first Gay and Lesbian civil rights bill in 1982, seven years before any other state followed suit.

ANOTHER THREAT

But on the morning of Monday, February 12th, a sense of gloom descended over openly Lesbian state legislator Tammy Baldwin as she read a press release from the office of State Rep. Dean Kaufert (R-Neenah). It announced his intention to introduce a

proposal to ban same-gender marriage in the state of Wisconsin.

In a year that will see an increasing tangle of legal maneuvers in response to the anticipated decision by the Hawaiian Supreme Court affirming the constitutionality of same-gender marriages there, it was not just the prospect of the bill itself that had Baldwin concerned.

What she and other community leaders dreaded most was the bruising and divisive debate that could ensue should the bill reach the floor of the legislature. It was the kind of scene that was repeating itself in state capitals all across the country. And this was not just coincidence. In the previous two weeks, nine states had had similar bills introduced, bringing the total of states where bills had been or were about to be introduced to 19.

At an early February weekend rally that preceded the Iowa caucuses broadcast nationwide on C-SPAN,

(Madison News, Continued on Page 6)

Join the Efforts to Help Hotel Washington's Tenants and Staff!

Madison — In the wake of the disaster at the Hotel Washington Complex, several efforts are underway to assist the tenants who have lost their homes and the many workers who have lost their jobs.

The Madison Gay/Lesbian Resource Center's Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Business Alliance, in association with the Wisconsin Community Fund, has created a special relief fund to support the former tenants of the hotel. Funds collected will help support these individuals with transitional housing, food, clothing and other critical needs.

"Our goal is to bring together a substantial amount of funds to help persons displaced by the fire get back on their feet," said Tom Neal, a LGB Business Alliance member.

"Your support is needed now, so we can help people just as soon as we can," said Steve Starkey of the Wisconsin Community Fund, a foundation which funds progressive organizations and social change.

Donations can be made to the fund by sending a check or money order to

the Wisconsin Community Fund, 122 State Street, Suite 508, Madison, WI 53703. Indicate the donation is for "Hotel Washington Tenant's Relief Fund."



A huge rainbow flag was draped over the Hotel's only standing wall, and people left memorabilia and messages on the fence surrounding the site.

Photo: Jamie

In addition, the LGB Business Alliance is putting together a list of LesBiGay and LesBiGay-friendly businesses which currently have openings for part- or full-time employees. The purpose is to find work for all the employees displaced by the Hotel Washington fire.

Several members of the LGB Business Alliance will offer their services — such as resume production and printing — for free or for significantly reduced costs.

Displaced Hotel Wash employees should contact Greg Scheel for a list of job opportunities or discounted job-related services.

LGB businesses that have part- or full-time openings, or that wish to donate services to displaced Hotel Wash workers should contact Tom Neal at (608) 256-2667.

Finally, a Hotel Washington Rebuilding Fund has been established. Send checks to the Fund in care of the Associated Bank, 222 W. Washington Avenue, Madison, WI 53703.



(Madison News, Continued on Page 5)

Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed bragged that such efforts were underway by his organization in all 50 states.

While some details remained murky at press time, it soon became clear that Rep. Kaufert had been chosen by Radical Right forces to introduce the bill because of his reputation as a moderate. Kaufert himself remarked that had a far right wing colleague introduced the bill, it would have stood little possibility of passage.

In a conversation with Rep. Baldwin early in the week, Kaufert assured his openly Lesbian colleague that his sponsorship of the bill was nothing personal.

As the week proceeded, however, Kaufert was to learn just how very personal it was indeed. Dozens of people, most of them constituents from the Fox River Valley cities of Neenah and Menasha, told their stories to Kaufert and his staff. At times, the phone lines were so jammed up that not even Rep. Baldwin, nearby in the Capitol, could get through.

PROPOSAL WITHDRAWN

Countless Gay and Lesbian constituents bravely "came out" to Kaufert — and no longer could he pretend that Gays and Lesbians lived only in someone else's district. Members of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) told him of their fears for their loved ones, and religious leaders spoke of the need to withdraw the bill until an atmosphere of under-



*This was the eerie scene at the gas station adjacent to the Hotel Wash the night of the blaze.
Photo: Jamie*

standing and conciliation could be created around the debate.

Kaufert listened — and learned. Apparently, he also heard from proponents of his bill who were equally influential in changing his mind. He received scores of calls from fanatical Right Wingers who welcomed Kaufert

as one their own with rhetoric filled with hatred and vitriol. Kaufert, who prides himself on his even-handedness and reasonableness, was reportedly sickened by their embrace of him.

On Thursday, February 15th, Log Cabin legislative director Scott Evertz had an extremely productive meeting with Kaufert. By late in the day, word reached Baldwin's office that Kaufert was having second thoughts. And on the morning of Saturday, February 17th, Baldwin announced to an alternately tearful and cheerful crowd of 300 at Madison's First Unitarian Society Church that the anti-Gay initiative had been turned back.

For a single day, LesBiGay community members from across the state basked in the glow of shared accomplishment.

Knowing full well that another legislator might introduce a similar bill at any moment, however, community leaders proceeded with plans for a Sunday night organizing meeting. Despite their success, movement leaders realized that much more work remained for the statewide political group Action Wisconsin and other groups throughout the state.

MORE ON HOTEL WASH

Then on Sunday morning, the world was turned on its head as the Hotel Washington erupted in flames.

The first call went out at 6:15am and new Madison Fire Chief Debra Amesqua arrived on the scene by 6:20 am.

Shortly thereafter, what had begun as a call made in response to suspicious smoke quickly escalated into a full-fledged fire call. Within minutes, flames were shooting through the roof.

Thanks to the quick thinking of several Hotel Washington employees, all residents and guests were quickly evacuated. Miraculously, the only casualty was a resident's cat.

The speed with which the flames spread immediately raised suspicions of foul play. However, fire officials and community leaders did their best to quell rumors until such time as real information would be forthcoming.

Adding to community fears were a recent string of homophobia-based incidents in the greater Madison community. Two weeks before, the front window of The United, Madison's LesBiGay social service agency, had been smashed out with a brick.



*At the Capital in Madison, speakers address the approximately 1,000 people at a rally held in wake of the Hotel Washington fire.
Photo: John Quinlan*

At about the same time, fire fighter Ronnie Greer was informed that he faced potential disciplinary action for handing out anti-Gay tracts while on the job. On the morning of the fire, Greer, with his three young sons in tow, was seen on the street in front of the hotel.

Greer told reporters: "It's a tragic loss of a historical building, but I'm glad to see certain establishments in the place are gone. If it means the end to certain types of business, I don't have a problem with that."

When people discovered who he was, Greer faced a series of angry confrontations mitigated only by the presence of his young sons. Later, Madison Mayor Paul Soglin joined with the area's Gay and Lesbian leaders to condemn Greer's remarks.

Suspensions of a homophobia-based hate crime had also been raised because the hotel complex had been prominently featured in "Rhythm," an entertainment supplement that appears in both Madison daily newspapers. It had hit the newstands just two days before the fire.

A picture of drag queens was on the cover, and an extensive description of the establishment's mission as a Gay hangout filled much of the supplement. Had someone needed a target for their hatred, many reasoned, the hotel's prominence in "Rhythm" might well have been the catalyst for their actions.

CHIEF AMESQUA CALMS FEARS

On Sunday night, an organizing meeting originally scheduled to deal with the anti-Gay marriage bill took on new purpose as 70 activists came together at the University of Wisconsin's Memorial Union.

(Madison News, Continued on Page 13)

Fire Chief Debra Amesqua made a special appearance in order to calm fears. "This is a tragedy," she said. "It is an enormous loss of an important landmark for this community."

Since little was known about the cause of the fire at that time, Amesqua's principal goal was to let members of the LesBiGay community know that they would be informed of all developments as they became known.

Amesqua's comments were well received, and then more than 30 questions and theories about the fire poured out from those assembled. Throughout, Amesqua's tone was authoritative but conversational, and she kept repeating over and over again the need to get everyone's fears out on the table where they could be discussed, and where people could come together as a community to confront them.

One set of fears was less easy to address, however — the campaign of hatred being waged by fire fighter Ronnie Greer. Prior to Amesqua's arrival at the meeting, the matter had been very much on the lips of everyone gathered there, and it became the subject of an intense discussion after the most pressing questions about the fire were answered.

Because it was a pending personnel matter, Amesqua initially declined comment. However, when pressed, she addressed concerns about the potential for declining morale resulting from a

possible lack of trust by Lesbian or Gay fire fighters in relation to their straight colleagues on the force. Amesqua replied that the issue was moot — the level of trust was high.

A more pointed question came from a Lesbian who wondered if some Madison fire fighters might be less vigilant when arriving at the home of a Gay or Lesbian family whose home was adorned with a Rainbow flag. Here, Amesqua was unequivocal that no member of her force would ever be in a position of giving differential service to people based on who they are.

As Amesqua left the meeting, 45 minutes after arriving, those assembled thanked her with loud and resounding applause.

LEADERSHIP RECOGNIZED

As the gathering proceeded, the energy level was high as Action Wisconsin president Juliet Brodie, Log Cabin Republican leader Scott Evertz, and Rep. Baldwin recapped the week's events. Receiving special recognition and prolonged applause was Action Wisconsin board member Mike Fitzpatrick, who recounted the Fox Valley region's substantial contributions to the success of the efforts to turn back the anti-Gay marriage bill the previous week.

The meeting ended quickly, and soon dozens of people, ranging in age from five to fifty, quickly dispensed with the task of putting out a 3,000 piece statewide mailing.

On mid-Sunday afternoon (Feb.

11th), over 200 people had gathered for an interfaith service at the old Madison rail depot, only 100 yards from from the still burning Hotel Wash. Although the shock of the loss was still acute, the process of healing was already beginning.

Late on Sunday and throughout Monday, a small but dedicated core of people came together to spread the word about the Capitol rally on Monday evening. While the papers and broadcast news outlets also carried the news, most of the turnout was ascribed to word-of-mouth, as friend reached out to friend at work, on the street, and on the phone.

By the time 6pm rolled around, well over 1,000 gathered at the Capitol, stretched out over an arc more than 100 yards wide and 50 yards deep.

That day, almost unprecedented banner headlines screamed out the news in both daily newspapers, and all three TV news shows led their broadcasts with live reports from the rally.

Mayor Paul Soglin, County Executive Rick Phelps, University of Wisconsin Dean of Students Mary Rouse, and Equal Opportunities Commission Director Anthony Brown all expressed their sorrow and their solidarity with the gathering.

As candles glimmered for as far as the eye could see, hugs abounded, as did other expressions of love and community. As one speaker noted, all of those gathered there — Gay and straight, black and white, Jew and Gentile — had come together to mourn the loss of a shared history, and to look to the future.



The Edgewater Inn Hotel & Resort

Paul And Darren Would Like To Invite You To Spend Your Summer Vacation With Us In The Northwoods. If You Mention This Ad You Will Save 10% Off Your Stay. Better Hurry Though, Summer Reservations Are Filling Fast.



- Non-Smoking Rooms
- Free Continental Breakfast
- 10 Cup In Room Coffee
- Waterfront Modern Cottages
- Queen Size Beds
- Free Cable TV, HBO, Disney
- Pets Always Welcome
- Sundecks & Two Piers Riverside
- Gay Owned & Operated
- Cinemax And Showtime
- Near Hiking/Biking Trails
- Fax, E-mail And Internet Services
- 5.5 Acres Of Land With Volleyball & More
- We Are Located 1/4 Mile From Downtown Area
- Nearby Restaurants & Health Club
- Eagle River Chain Of 28 Lakes Is Right In Our Backyard

5054 Hgwy 70 West
Eagle River, WI 54521 **715 - 479 - 4011**

Visa, MasterCard, Amex, Discover And Novus
Credit Cards Welcome
E-Mail: edgewtr@newnorth.net