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LOCAL NEWS

Praise & protest for HRC

By [MIKE LAVERS](#)
Friday, February 11, 2005

A day after New York State Supreme Court Judge Doris Ling-Cohan ruled that the state's effective ban on marriage for same-sex couples is unconstitutional, more than 900 people gathered Saturday, Feb. 5, at the Waldorf-Astoria in Midtown Manhattan for the Human Rights Campaign's fourth annual Greater New York Dinner.

The dinner doubled as a fundraiser for the nation's largest gay rights organization and attracted an array of elected officials and celebrities. But the well-dressed attendees faced gay protesters at the Park and Lexington Avenues entrance to the hotel.

More than 40 people from the group QueerFist were joined by Larry Kramer. QueerFist was formed shortly after last summer's Republican National Convention here. The protesters complained about HRC's decision to honor pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, Inc., and what they perceive as HRC's rightward (or at least Establishment) tilt.

Gay GOP Plattsburgh, N.Y., Mayor Dan Stewart joined local politicians and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" style guru Carson Kressley, who took the stage dressed as SpongeBob SquarePants.

Kressley immediately cut to the day's biggest news. "People have the right to love, to live with and to marry whoever they want, regardless of their sexual orientation," he said.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg again said that he personally supports same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, many in the audience soundly booed the mayor when he said he would challenge the court's decision.

Former Texas Gov. Ann Richards said she supports same-sex marriage during her keynote speech. Richards described Ling-Cohan as a "brave justice. If you all want to get married, it's all right with me," Richard said as the audience erupted in applause. "It hasn't worked too damn well for us of the heterosexual persuasion. I was married for 30 years. Been there, done that."

Richards also blasted newly appointed U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings for urging the Public Broadcasting System last month not to broadcast an episode of the popular children's program "Postcards from Buster" because it included children with lesbian mothers. She also accused President George W. Bush and the conservative right of using the



Protesters from QueerFist paraded in front of the Waldorf-Astoria. They objected to honoring Pfizer, but also HRC stances on issues like Social Security and even marriage.

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U.S. Constitution to promote their own agenda.

"His [Bush's] Constitution doesn't include the Bill of Rights," Richards charged. "Religious zealots tell us that they're only defending traditional American values. They have lost site of traditional values. And the religious right in this country has gone to great efforts and spent a lot of money to obscure what this country is about.

"American Idol 2" runner-up Kimberley Locke performed a number of singles from her album "One Love," including "8th World Wonder." Actress Susan Sarandon was also scheduled to appear at the dinner, but cancelled at the last minute due to unspecified reasons.

HRC presented the New Jersey Lesbian & Gay Coalition with its Equality Award for its work on behalf of gay Garden Staters. "New Jersey is not defined by its turnpike, but by its people," NJLGC President Laura Pople said. "We have an incredible and vibrant and active LGBTI community."

Pfizer received a 100 percent rating on the organization's Corporate Equality Index, with its Corporate Equality Award for "excellence in GLBT workplace issues." Upon receiving its award, Pat Kelly, vice president of Pfizer, Inc., said that his company "tries to create an environment where all are welcome. We don't do this because we want to win awards. We do it because it is the right thing to do."

Kramer described HRC's decision to honor Pfizer as "appalling. The organization has turned into shit," he said. "It is useless for us now when we need them so desperately."

Haley Hottpink said she wanted to make a statement because "HRC almost never gets challenged in a public, theatrical forum," she said. "An organized group pointing out inconsistencies with HRC is a threat it hasn't felt before by an organized community."

Despite the presence of the protestors, HRC Foundation Vice President Winnie Stachelberg told those inside that she remains optimistic about the future of her organization. She said that HRC would continue to fight for equality.

"With or without this administration's support, we have momentum on our side," Stachelberg said. "When George W. Bush leaves in Washington in four years, HRC will still be there and we will continue to fight for what matters."

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