

# Chicago Rights Ordinance passes 28-17

by Tracy Baim

Fifteen years after a gay rights ordinance was first introduced in Chicago's City Council, a newer, more comprehensive version was passed 28-17 Dec. 21 amid loud cheers from supporters.

The comprehensive Human Rights Ordinance, which outlaws discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, will protect not only gays, lesbians and bisexuals, but also bans discrimination against people based on disability, age, gender, and several other categories.

The City Council chambers were filled with great anticipation the morning of the historic vote. Many of the activists who time and again have showed up for Council hearings were there again--this time with a feeling of excitement, believing that "this time was it."

However, it was also clear that the vote could go either way. During the aldermanic debate, as each crucial alderman stood and voiced support, the crowd cheered. The aldermen getting the loudest response were those who were strongest in their opposition in past months: Ald. Marlene Carter, Ald. Bernie Stone, and Ald. Keith Caldwell. Also a surprise 'yes' vote: Ald. Sheneather Butler.

Another crucial vote change was Ald. Eugene Schuler, who was the subject of extensive constituent lobbying. [In fact, the vote could have been 29-17--Ald. Mell was in Hong Kong--he voted 'yes' in a previous vote.]

Strangely quiet during the Ordinance vote were the fundamentalist opponents who in past years could be counted on to preach that "God Created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" outside City Hall--including Rev. Hiram Crawford, who said little during the Council session. Even the aldermanic opposition was relatively quiet--unlike the Sept. 14 vote, when Ald. Hagopian called gays "animals" and Ald. Carter referred to gays as "sissies." While there were statements against the Ordinance Dec. 21, those comments (primarily based on religious opposition) were certainly timid compared to Sept. 14.

## The Primary Influence

The Ordinance victory was attributed to several factors, including, most significantly, the upcoming Mayoral election. While the Ordinance probably would have passed eventually, the election sped up the clock. Every major Mayoral candidate has announced his support for gay rights, and Dec. 21 was the "show and tell" vote for several candidates.

The candidate with the most to lose--and the most to gain--Dec. 21 was Mayor Eugene Sawyer. According to Town Meeting activists

working closely on the issue, Sawyer was by far the winner on the Ordinance, having converted the most 'no' to 'yes' votes.

"I don't think the Ordinance would have passed without the upcoming Mayor's race. I know that the Mayor was very much committed to this Ordinance, and desperately needed this win. I don't think we would have gotten the [State's Attorney and Mayoral candidate Richard] Daley votes," Town Meeting activist Rick Garcia said.

As the Council victory became evident, gays and lesbians in the audience seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief, in addition to loud applause, for each "yes" vote. Council members who had worked for many months on the Ordinance--including Bernie Hansen, Kathy Osterman, and Helen Shiller--also didn't hold back their relief. Ald. Anna Langford was so excited at Ald. Carter's vote switch that she jumped up and hugged her.

After gay rights protections were defeated in 1986 and earlier in 1988, the victory was well appreciated Dec. 21--and politicians were quick to capitalize on it. That evening, hundreds of gay rights supporters were joined by several mayoral hopefuls at a victory party at Ann Sather's restaurant on Belmont.

## Pulling from every 'bloc'

The Ordinance votes came from every political "bloc" of the City Council but only the women and Hispanics voted entirely for the Ordinance.

"I looked at independents, progressives, and regular machine Democrats," Garcia said. "And I knew that we could not do it at all without white ethnics, without some of the more regular types. We knew we would have the progressives...It was also very hard. You had regular Dems for us, independents/progressives against us--there were so many unholy alliances in this whole thing..."

"I think that it translates very well politically. I think it's dangerous for our community to be identified with one political ideology, or even a certain political party. Those of us who worked on the Ordinance, it is our feeling that our issues are primary, our community is primary. We must persuade legislators, whoever they are, to address our issues and remedy that through legislation."

"We had a good strategy to know what battles to pick, to have a low-key media coverage to eliminate religious opposition," Town Meeting's Laurie Dittman said. "All the aldermen were possible votes until we heard otherwise. Moving away from partisan politics opened up the vote."

## Town Meeting's role

Town Meeting, founded after the 1986 Ordinance defeat, and which will now disband when the Ordinance officially becomes law next month, was made up of primarily two groups: a core group of four activists who essentially "quarterbacked" the Ordinance; a second, larger, flexible group of about 20 people who met on a regular basis to discuss strategy and the "next step" to take.

Garcia, Jon-Henri Damski, Dittman, and Arthur Johnston were the four activists in charge of day to day strategy. The larger group included Carole Powell, Vince Samar, Vern Huls and Al Wardell from the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Sue Purrington and Alison Brill from the National Organization for Women, progressive political activist Ron Sable, Peggy Baker [at the time the Mayor's Coordinator of Gay and Lesbian Issues], Chris Cothran and Larry Rolla [who are on the Mayor's Committee on Gay and Lesbian Issues but who acted as individuals on the Ordinance effort], and Donna Quinn of Chicago Catholic Women.

A week before the vote, with constituent



One Ordinance 'yes' vote being attributed to heavy constituent pressure is that of 47th Ward Ald. Eugene Schuler (seated, left), who twice before voted against the Ordinance. Schuler is pictured here with gay/lesbian rights activists just a few days before the Council vote. Seated with Schuler is Ald. Kathy Osterman. Town Meeting activists Jon-Henri Damski (left), Laurie Dittman, Rick Garcia, and Arthur Johnston were at the lobbying session, as was 47th Ward resident Tim Eannarino (right). Photo by Lisa Ebright

lobbying nearly complete, activists met with Mayoral candidates Ald. Timothy Evans, State's Attorney Richard Daley, and Mayor Sawyer to convince them of the significance of the Dec. 21 vote.

According to Garcia, Evans was asked to work on converting Jesse Evans and Ed Smith. Both aldermen voted 'no.' Daley was asked to influence Huels, Fairy, and Kotlarz. While Kotlarz abstained and Huels and Fairy voted 'yes,' Daley said he did not influence their vote. While Daley may have distanced himself from the votes, "I know his emissaries--Hansen and Osterman--worked on them," Garcia said.

Sawyer was told to pressure Carter, Henry, Austin, Butler, Caldwell, and Beavers. Beavers was the only one who didn't switch to a 'yes,' and Butler's switch was a big shock even to the mayor. Assistant to the Mayor, Nancy Bellew, heavily lobbied Ald. Stone, her own alderman.

Garcia and Dittman said Sawyer was the most successful in converting 'no' votes to 'yes.'

"Sawyer was the clear winner," said Dittman, who since the vote has declared her support for Sawyer's mayoral candidacy. Garcia, too, was so impressed with Sawyer's Ordinance efforts that he will also support Sawyer in the Democratic primary Feb. 28.

"The thing that stands out for me about the Ordinance is that it was a very empowering experience for us as a community," Garcia said. "We learned how to use the system to make sure our issues are addressed. Literally hundreds of people have called aldermen for the very first time in their lives...The best part is that the gay community has controlled the process from the beginning of drafting until the vote. That's very important for us--we are the ones who controlled this the whole way. We didn't have to rely on any politician or political party. We did it. No candidate, no mayor, no one else delivered for us."

Two additions to the new Ordinance are credited with convincing some aldermen to vote 'yes.' Both, however, were dismissed as minor changes by Town Meeting activists. The first was a limited religious exemption, the second a statement that says the Ordinance does not advocate any particular "lifestyle of religious view."

## Impact of Ordinance

"People will now have recourse if they are discriminated against. They have a tool to

fight back," said Garcia. "But the other thing the Ordinance does is much more important--the psychological effect. People are viewing themselves as full citizens. They have been affirmed, they've been empowered. It's as much a symbolic victory as it is a practical victory, maybe even more so."

"[The victory itself] tells us...we know how to use the system for our issues, and that we are part of the city. While we were delayed all those times, it was at times frustrating. But the reality is, it only took two years, for a brand new piece of legislation, from drafting it to passing it. In a sense, that's a very short time. We followed this through the whole process, from drafting it to bringing it to the community, selling it to legislators."

"We thought we had the votes in September [when the Ordinance fell a few votes short]. ...I was confident that it would pass. I watched the vote disintegrate before our eyes. The reasons? We relied in September very heavily on the Mayor and other Council members to tell us who were 'yes' or 'no' votes. We did not, I believe, put sufficient pressure on the Mayor's Office. I think he thought all he had to do is ask his votes to do it. He didn't put pressure in September. Those people had nothing to lose or gain."

"I think that vote was necessary. There was always a tension between those of us who wanted to bring it up, even if we didn't have the votes. We realized [the September vote] was a positive thing. It identified who are supporters were. We could identify who we needed to lobby--a smaller group of people."

"The [September vote] had a lot to do with the Ordinance passing [Dec. 21]," Peggy Baker said. "The administration didn't want to bring it up [in September], because they knew they didn't have the votes. And the decision had to be made [two days before]. I was told they weren't going to notice it up because they didn't have the votes. I [told administration officials] that it's got to be called up whether you have the votes or not, because nobody's going to understand what's involved in passing this thing. The community's ready, we've got all the votes we're going to get, unless something changes, and it's got to be brought to a vote...."

"There was a vote. There was the whole circus that happened in Council," Baker said. "I don't think Sawyer knew what was to be gained by passing the Ordinance until he went through that experience. A lot of people had to have that experience."

## The Council Vote:

### Yes

Bobbi Rush (2nd), Dorothy Tillman (3rd), Timothy Evans (4th), Lawrence Bloom (5th), Ronald Robinson (6th), Keith Caldwell (8th), Patrick Huels (11th), Mark Fary (12th), Edward M. Burke (14th), Marlene Carter (15th), Anna Langford (16th), Jesus Garcia (22nd), William Henry (24th), Juan Soliz (25th), Luis Gutierrez (26th), Sheneather Butler (27th), Danny K. Davis (29th), Ray Figueroa (31st), Percy Giles (37th), Patrick O'Connor (40th), Burton F. Natarus (42nd), Edwin Eisendrath (43rd), Bernard Hansen (44th), Helen Shiller (46th), Eugene Schuler (47th), Kathy Osterman (48th), David Orr (49th), and Bernard Stone (50th).

### No

Fred B. Roti (1st), Williams Beavers (7th), Robert Shaw (9th), Victor Vrydolyak (10th), John Madrzyk (13th), Allan Streeter (17th), Michael Sheahan (19th), Ernest Jones (20th), William Krystyniak (23rd), Ed Smith (28th), George Hagopian (30th), Lemuel Austin (34th), William Banks (36th), Thomas Cullerton (38th), Anthony Laurino (39th), Roman Pucinski (41st), and Patrick Levar (45th).

### Abstaining

Joseph Kotlarz (35th)

### Absent

Robert Kellam (18th), Jesse Evans (21st), Terry Gabinski (32nd), and Richard Mell (33rd).