
Two students form gay marriage PAC

Delaware Right to Marry group urging state legislature to introduce equality bill

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When junior Bill Humphrey saw the success Democrats had in Delaware in the midst of a nationwide Republican wave last fall, he recognized an opportunity.

The state has long been considered conservative on social issues, but perhaps the time had arrived to push for gay marriage legislation in Delaware, Humphrey thought.

"I felt like this was the year to do it, and nobody else was going to step up to do it, so I thought I would give it a shot," Humphrey said.

Late last year, he joined with senior Dan Cole to establish Delaware Right to Marry, a political action committee that advocates legalizing gay marriage.

The two drafted a marriage equality bill modeled after legislation in New Hampshire, and hope to find a legislator to introduce it before the general assembly adjourns in June.

Humphrey, president of the College Democrats, grew up in Massachusetts, where gay marriage has been legal since 2004.

"Nothing really changed, and it just became a fact of life and everybody moved on," he said.

But when he came to Delaware for college, the lack of marriage equality here seemed odd, and he was surprised there were not any groups pushing for it.

Group members' first action was to fund a poll to gauge Delawareans' feelings on gay marriage. Results of the poll, released earlier this month by the national polling firm Public Policy Polling, found the state evenly split on the issue.

It found that 48 percent of Delawareans favor gay marriage, and 47 percent strongly oppose or somewhat oppose it. Another 5 percent were unsure.

Humphrey said although he had hoped for majority support, the poll results still confirmed his hunch that public opinion in the state had shifted.

"If you give those results to people who don't know Delaware, they say, 'That's disappointing,'" he said. "But when I give them to people in Delaware, people have been having insane reactions. They can't believe we had the results we got because they assumed Delaware was way more conservative on this."

The group is now raising money in preparation for an advertising campaign in support of its bill. Humphrey admits the initiative faces an uphill battle, in part because such legislation was considered so unlikely in Delaware that no ground work had been done. The public as well as many legislators still need to be educated on the issue in order for the bill to have a chance, he said.

The bill will also face competition from a civil unions bill that is expected to be introduced during this legislative session. Civil unions provide gay couples with the legal rights of marriage without labeling it marriage.

Though marriage equality is usually harder to sell than civil unions, Humphrey said he would rather see the same set of rules apply to both straight and gay couples.

"If gay people have a different set of rules that apply to them, that's a signal to society that there's something different," he said. "From our point of view, there shouldn't be a difference."

Longtime gay rights activist Douglas Marshall-Steele, of Milton, Del., said he supports both initiatives, but predicts the civil union bill has the best chance of passing.

"Some people may think of civil unions as second-class, back-of-the-bus status, but we who are gay are not even on the bus in Delaware as far as relationship recognition, so civil unions legislation is a step in the right direction, but it can't deliver all the legal rights that civil marriage can," Marshall-Steele said.

Cole, president of Haven, the university's student-run LGBT group, said he is confident that Delaware will take at least some steps toward gay marriage.

"I think we have a pretty great chance at civil unions and once people are less afraid and willing to stand up for what is right, gay marriage will pass," Cole said.

Haven and Delaware Right to Marry members plan to hold an event on campus sometime this semester to encourage students to join the cause.

Already, Humphrey and Cole are winning praise for their efforts.

"It actually kind of shocked me not only that they did it, but that they did it so quickly," said Chris Counihan, a political science professor at the university who gave the two students some advice early on in their efforts. "There's a group of people I know who are professionals in politics who

have been talking for the last two or three years about putting together a PAC and they haven't done it yet. These are people who do this for a living and then some college kids do it in a couple of months."