

Opinion

Don't judge a book by its cover

by Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge



My partner Wanda and I volunteered our time recently to talk with people at the state fair about the upcoming amendment to the S.C. constitution that would discriminate against same-sex

couples. I had my reservations about volunteering for the South Carolina Equality Coalition booth but within our first 15 minutes we had at least four positive interactions with people.

I would say that 99 percent of our conversations through the night were extremely positive. I learned in those four hours not to judge book by its cover — ever. One grizzled man in well-worn blue jeans and a T-shirt almost ran up to the booth, grabbed a few of the free rainbow bracelets we were giving away and asked, “May I have these?”

“Sure,” I said, “but you have to hear my pitch.”

He smiled broadly, “I don’t have to hear your pitch, two of my family members are gay and I’ll vote against anything that hurts them.” I wanted to hug him.

Then, two African-American sisters

poked through the bracelets and chatted with me. One was the mother of a 26-year-old lesbian — the other the adoring aunt. “I don’t want my daughter to face any dis-

crimination,” the mom told me — the aunt emphatically agreed.

One white couple with the appropriate 2.5 children stopped to chat and thought the amendment was a terrible idea — they said they’d certainly vote no.

A man with a military haircut stopped by with his three kids and wife in tow and was adamant about voting against the amendment. He was angry over Westboro Baptist Church leader Fred Phelps and his recent protests of the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq. Phelps is the Topeka, Kan., minister known for his protests of gay and lesbian events. This man was all for fairness — for us and for soldiers.

What occurred to me during our night at the fair was the absolute importance for gay and lesbian people in this state to come out — to their bosses, their families, their pastors and their friends. A majority of the positive comments we heard were from people who either had family members or friends who were gay.

ACT UP’s old slogan came to mind — “silence equals death” — in South Carolina silence from our community could well mean the death of equality for our relationships. What I learned is that South Carolinians, when given a chance to understand our lives will overwhelmingly support our rights. But they’ll only get to know us if we come out and speak up.