

Magazine refutes 'bigotry' charge of mystery coalition

Some organizations claim unauthorized use of names

By ETHAN BARON
STAFF WRITER

About a hundred Santa Cruz County business owners have received a letter from a mysterious "coalition" that accuses them of supporting "bigoted viewpoints" by advertising in a local conservative magazine, and suggests they quit advertising in the publication.

The letter, under the letterhead "The Santa Cruz County Coalition for Factual and Accurate Information," lists 16 organizations, most of them gay and lesbian groups, as members or supporters of the coalition.

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— Noel Smith, publisher

Many of those groups, including the AIDS Legal Referral Panel, the Men's Network, the Triangle Speakers and the American Civil Liberties Union, said they have never heard of the coalition, much less supported it.

"We're outraged by the unauthorized use of our name," said Eadie Deutsch, vice-chairwoman of the Santa Cruz chapter of the ACLU, which tops the list of purported members and supporters.

"We have very serious problems with the position they're taking," Deutsch said. The ACLU supports free speech, she said, and the letter may suppress it.

The local ACLU office is sending the coalition a letter demanding that it notify all the advertisers who got the letter that the ACLU does not support the coalition and never did, Deutsch said.

The Santa Cruz chapter of one group listed — the National Organization for Women — does support the coalition and its letter campaign, but local NOW members were unaware that the letter contained an inaccurate list of supporters, said Pat Jaloza, co-coordinator of the Santa Cruz NOW.

Businesses began receiving the coalition's letter last weekend.

The author of the letter warns business owners that the coalition is alerting its members to the content of The Forum, a monthly Christian-oriented magazine. The magazine "promotes myths and misconceptions about various minorities based on sexual orientation," the author states, and it "continues to perpetuate the hatred of people with a different sexual orientation as well as people with opposing views."

The coalition provides its members with that information to help them decide whether to do business with The Forum's advertisers, the letter states.

While the letter invites the advertisers to engage in dialogue, it gives only a post office box in Aptos and no phone number.

The chief organizer of the coalition has been identified as Randy

Wisong, an Aptos man who teaches at Valley Vista elementary school in San Jose and runs The Rainbow Reception, a welcoming group for gays and lesbians new to the Santa Cruz area.

Wisong told the Register-Pajaronian some groups may have been listed as supporters by mistake, and his coalition would remove their names if they wished.

The coalition is an alliance of 20 or so people who have met six or seven times in a campaign to stop people from patronizing businesses who advertise in The Forum, Wisong said.

The magazine perpetuates "distortions and myths, downright lies" about homosexuals and feminists, he said. While he supports free speech, there is no reason to trade with people who "sanction" The Forum's expressions by advertising in the magazine.

Published in Santa Cruz, The Forum promotes a view that people turn homosexual during personality development, and can return to heterosexuality, said Noel Smith, the magazine's publisher.

Each month Smith runs a testimonial from a former gay or lesbian on how they converted back to heterosexuality.

"We have a pro-family focus," Smith said. "We don't preach hate. We've never said anything that I consider hateful." He said all of his hundred or so advertisers got the coalition's letter. A couple of his advertisers told him they considered the letter "threatful," and two dropped their ads from his magazine, Smith said.

Bob Bonebrake, a Santa Cruz chiropractor who got one of the letters, said gays and lesbians may feel threatened by The Forum, but the magazine's publishers and writers have a right to express their opinions. Bonebrake sees the letter as an expression of intolerance. "The only ideas that are tolerated are the ones that are currently politically correct," he said. "All the other ones are attacked."

One advertiser, karate school owner Kathy Thompson, said the letter prompted her to take action. "I'm enlarging my ad in The Forum," she said. She takes exception to the letter's characterization of The Forum as "bigoted."

"They're not bigoted. The Forum gives very reasonable conservative information regarding political things in the area, and from a Bible viewpoint."

Thompson said she found irony in the coalition's title, because it purports to support "Factual and Accurate Information," but lists members and supporters who are neither members nor supporters.

While some people in the organizations listed in the letter may agree that The Forum promotes bigotry, the letter is damaging to the cause of gay and lesbian rights, said Merrie Schaller, a programmer at "Closet-Free Radio," which is falsely listed as a supporter.

"It really makes us look bad," she said, adding that "The Forum is probably much more dangerous than the letter."

Schaller said the letter was probably motivated by over zealousness combined with political naivete.