

GLBT rights activist pulls back on the 'T'

BY BETH REINHARD

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Robin Bodiford is not ``The Man.''

For one, she's a lesbian whose law practice almost exclusively represents gay clients. She spearheaded groundbreaking ordinances in Broward County to protect gay rights and allow same-sex couples to register as domestic partners. When the only county commissioner who voted against both ordinances, John Rodstrom, received an award from the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Fort Lauderdale, she staged a one-woman walkout.

In other words, she has devoted her life and career to sticking it to the you know who.

But now Bodiford finds herself in the most unlikely of roles. As a small but strident band of activists lobbies to add legal protections for transgender people to the county ordinance, Bodiford is pulling back.

Here's why: She and other political veterans fear that adding "gender identity and expression" to the ordinance will jeopardize hard-won rights already on the books. With three countywide elections looming in 2008 -- the presidential primary on Jan. 29, the Aug. 26. primary and the Nov. 4 general election -- gay-rights opponents would have three opportunities to get a repeal on the ballot.

On Wednesday, Bodiford and political consultant Richard Giorgio booked a room at the Gay and Lesbian Center to sound the alarm. Let's wait until May to add transgender to the ordinance, they said, to keep a potential repeal at bay until at least 2010.

"We've always proceeded carefully and slowly to make sure that when we fight for our rights, we keep those rights," Giorgio said. "It makes little sense to secure transgender protections only to watch them get repealed six months later."

They have reason for concern. The domestic partnership ordinance, which allows same-sex partners to secure hospital visitation rights like married couples, weathered a court challenge.

The ordinance that bans discrimination based on sexual orientation endured two petition drives aimed at repeal.

"You think after all the years that I could sit idly by and watch everything I worked for crash and burn without at least attempting to allow the greater gay and lesbian community know how their rights were being risked?" Bodiford asked.

She may be overreacting. Miami Beach and other South Florida cities have added transgender protections without a backlash. A group organized to beat back a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage has raised more than \$1 million, reflecting the gay community's fundraising and organization prowess.

At the meeting, about 10 people who favor the transgender amendment filed into the back of the room and tried to take over the microphone. Transgender people typically dress in the style of the opposite gender than they were born and may seek medical treatment to change their gender.

"Let them speak!" shouted AIDS activist Michael Rajner. "You've silenced them long enough!"

A tall woman dressed all in black took the floor.

"How dare you deny me my rights?" demanded Tiffany Arieagus, an AIDS counselor well known in the local drag queen circuit. "What about me?"

Bodiford was shaken. "I'm not here to be your enemy," she said.

Step back and see what has happened here. The lesbian activist is no longer the radical agitating for change. Now she's the one controlling the microphone and representing the political establishment. Now she's ``The Man.''

And perhaps in some strange way, this is progress.

Beth Reinhard is the political writer for The Miami Herald.