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Unfinished Business: OUTLAW Dinner Hears the Musings of an Activist

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Law School Report:

“

Activism is more often than not one person changing one person. It never makes the headlines, but it makes it to the heart.” ”

— Elizabeth Conant

photos by Don Heupel



Unfinished Business

OUTLAW dinner hears the musings of an activist

At the fourth annual OUTLAW dinner, Elizabeth Conant issued a challenge: "What would happen if each of us in this room, having carefully prepared some Bible study first, went to the pastor, rabbi, priest or minister at our place of worship, got an appointment, and asked them for verse-by-verse detail on the church's current official position on homosexuality — the current official position on *us*, face to face?"

"There is such huge power in the individual encounter. And activism is more often than not one person changing one person. It never makes the headlines, but it makes it to the heart."

"Musings of an Activist" was the title of the keynote speech given by Conant at the March 25 gathering for gay and lesbian UB Law students and their supporters, in the University Inn and Conference Center. Conant has a long pedigree as an activist, beginning with her stance against the Vietnam War and in the civil rights movement.



Law School Report:



Elizabeth Conant addresses the Outlaw dinner

More recently, she has worked on behalf of reproductive rights and now gay and lesbian issues, as a participant and board member of PFLAG – Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Persons. She and her partner have appeared before many college gatherings, preaching a message of acceptance.

Conant also was one of 200 national representatives of PFLAG who broke bread with the Rev. Jerry Falwell and



Conant in costume

his group in Lynchburg, Va., in October 1999 – a peace meeting of sorts.

An entertaining and highly motivating speaker, Conant – called “Babs” by her friends – delivered some stories from the front lines, and spoke broadly about the still-unfinished progress in

American society toward full acceptance for gays and lesbians.

“There is a Zen saying that I love: ‘When a teacher is needed, a teacher comes,’” Conant said. “I think it encapsulates a truth about how we change.

By the time our conscious mind tackles a new direction, our unconscious mind has already made the change. At last we are ready to hear what, at some level, we already know.”

She spoke of the June 27, 1969, police raid on a Greenwich Village bar that turned into what has become known as the Stonewall Riot – a turning point in gay/lesbian activism. “When a teacher was needed, a teacher came,” she said, “and the teacher was Stonewall. There are plenty of older gay Americans for whom that was a watershed. Within a few years, there were dozens of gay organizations, magazines, newspapers, community





At left: Marylous Sailer
Above: Mary Hewitt

centers. I think the lesson from Stonewall that we finally heard and immediately understood, was that gays and lesbians deserve the same promises as everyone else: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Conant went on to draw a distinction between what she sees as institutional religion's general hostility toward gays and lesbians, and individual thinking on the issue that transcends doctrine. "Many religious people are feeling the dissonance between the



church's official words and deeds and their personal knowledge of gay and lesbian lives," she said. "Many people of faith are also good people, increasingly uncomfortable in the knowledge that the church they love is adding to the suffering of people they love, and that it is wrong."

Conant cited the beating death of gay collegian Matthew Shepard and the Columbine High School shootings, saying, "There seems to be a national understanding now that we need to do

something different in our schools. As gay and lesbian people, we have to be intentional about protecting ourselves, and we all need savvy lawyers to push our country toward more equitable treatment."

And she concluded with a call to an activism of human kindness: "Any time any one of us comes out – a parent describing a child they love, a gay or lesbian person living out their own truth – any time we help soften the culture of school hallways, help a young patient trust us enough to tell us his secret, help a gay family make it over legal hurdles, change a single heart, we discover we are all activists – and in what good company we are." •

