

Homosexuals Urge Adoption of Anti-Bias Law

By ELAINE WOO, Times Staff Writer

When the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations convened at Plummer Park in West Hollywood to hear testimony about discrimination against homosexuals, it could not have chosen a more perfect location.

West Hollywood is known for its large homosexual community. Last week's day-long proceeding was, according to Commissioner Morris Kight, a longtime gay activist, the first comprehensive hearing in the nation on the topic of prejudice based on "sexual orientation."

The speakers addressed a wide range of concerns, including discriminatory treatment of gays in the fields of health care, employment, religion and the news media.

Attorney-activist Stephen Weltman urged the commission to recommend that the Board of Supervisors adopt a county-wide ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. He noted that none of the counties in the state have protective measures for homosexuals and

that AB 1, a bill that would have ensured gay rights in the workplace, was vetoed by Gov. Deukmejian this year.

Kight and other commissioners said they would support such a proposal but feared that it would encounter stiff opposition from the board's conservative majority.

Chris Uszler of the Alliance for Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry told the commission that "openly lesbian actresses and gay actors have no place" in Hollywood, which he said "markets the illusion" of acceptance.

Though he declined to name the show, he said that an extra working for "a current hit series" was fired when one of the producers decided that the background characters were "too faggy." In another instance, he said, the star of a long-running family-oriented television series was dropped from a soft-drink ad campaign because he is homosexual.

Arian B. Heidorn, managing editor of a gay publication, focused on portrayals of homosexuals in the media.

'Stabbed in the Heart'

"We haven't had a happy history" as characters in literature and movies, she said. Homosexual characters are murdered, castrated, eaten by cannibals and "stabbed in the heart" by losing their lovers to a member of the opposite sex. The message is that "all gay men and lesbians will straighten up and fly right if they just have the right man or the right woman."

Heidorn criticized the news media, which she said tends to sensationalize stories involving homosexuals. As an example, she cited the headline "Homosexual Torture" on a newspaper story about convicted Chicago mass murderer John Wayne Gacy. On the same page, she said, was another story about the rape of a woman and murder of her boyfriend. "That was a heterosexual torture murder," she said, but the sexual orientation of the murderer was not made an issue.

Other speakers turned their attention to the physical and verbal abuse of gays by non-gays. Attorney Thomas Coleman, a member of the attorney general's Commission on Racial, Ethnic, Religious and Minority Violence, said that attacks on homosexuals are a growing problem.

He cited a recent study by the National Gay Task Force that reported 1,682 acts of verbal harassment, physical assault and homicides against gays in 12 cities during the first eight months of 1983. In contrast, he said, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith reported 1,422 incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism and harassment nationwide for the entire year of 1982.

No Records

Coleman said no statistics on anti-gay violence in Los Angeles have been compiled. But "I can say there is a significant amount of violence in this community . . . some perpetrated by members of law enforcement agencies."

A later speaker, Capt. James Cook, commander of the West Hollywood sheriff's station, said he had no records of brutality against homosexuals in the area. But, he added, "We don't ask, 'Are you gay or are you straight?' when taking citizen's complaints."

Coleman said that other recent studies have shown that AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is being used as "an excuse or justification for anti-gay violence, particularly in San Francisco."

Other speakers said that publicity about AIDS as a "gay disease" is exacerbating prejudicial treatment of homosexuals.

"AIDS is not a gay disease," said Dr. Martin Finn, medical director of public health programs for the county. "It is a disease which is affecting gays at this time."

Allan T. Pinka of the AIDS Project, said 95% of AIDS victims are homosexual. Noting that the high percentage of homosexuals afflicted by the disease has led to the belief that the illness is caused by being gay, he told the commission several stories about the mistreatment of AIDS sufferers.

He claimed that doctors have been known to make disparaging comments to AIDS patients and their friends and relatives, and dentists have declined to treat them. Some nurses have refused to bathe or change the bed linens of AIDS victims, and hospital food-service personnel have left food trays outside their doors instead of carrying them inside.

He said that the majority of ambulance companies either will not serve AIDS patients or subject them to lengthy waits. Morticians have refused to prepare or dispose of their bodies after they have succumbed to the disease.

Finn said the illness has claimed 196 of 406 known victims in the county. It is caused by a virus which can be spread through intimate sexual contact or by receiving blood products from a person with AIDS.

No Basic Rights

Lee Walker, an attorney specializing in discrimination in employment, said homosexuals lack basic rights in the workplace.

Most gays are not able to "come in on Monday morning and talk freely about what went on in the weekend," he said, "whether it was a date with a boyfriend or with a girlfriend." They cannot put a photograph of their lover on their desk without fear of being ostracized or fired, he said. And, because "gay men are so often seen as wimps," they are passed over for promotions to executive or supervisory positions.

Other speakers addressed the high rate of alcohol abuse among gays, racism in the homosexual community, and the paucity of services for homeless gay youths.

One participant, Lillene Fifield of the Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center in Hollywood, expressed concern about the grim view of life being presented and said the commission was not being given a balanced picture.

"There's another whole part of our community who have managed to survive," she said. "We are survivors."

The commission will submit a report and a list of recommendations to the Board of Supervisors later this year.