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Gay Marriage Debate Draws Hundreds

Posted 2006-11-03

By Dan Kipperman

BRIDGEWATER — Just days before a controversial marriage amendment goes before Virginia voters, two Massachusetts natives argued the legal merits of gay marriage Thursday.

Former Massachusetts state Sen. Cheryl Jacques, and current majority leader for the Massachusetts House of Representatives John Rogers debated the issue before a crowd of about 500 at Bridgewater College's Cole Hall.

Jacques argued that the country is currently writing the next chapter in America's civil rights history, while Rogers defined marriage as a "unique relationship that is codified in our state laws."

On Tuesday, Virginia voters will decide whether to approve an amendment to the state Constitution that states, "only a union between one man and one woman may be recognized."



Brandon Showalter of Broadway asks a question of Thursday's panel debating gay rights at Bridgewater College.

Photo by Thomas J. Turney

Civil Rights Movement

Jacques compared the efforts of gay couples to legally marry to the struggle of women, African-Americans and Jewish-Americans earlier in U.S. history.

"We are at a crossroads of a difficult and emotional discussion in this country," she said. "We have to decide what role we want to play in the civil rights battle that is taking place right now."

Jacques warned students at the debate that voting for the marriage amendment would harm "hundreds of couples."

"By voting for that amendment, you are denying the rights of people that want to spend the rest of their lives together," she said. "Why should we treat gays any differently than any other married couple?"

Protecting Marriage

Rogers argued that gay couples should be protected under the law, just not in the same way as traditional married couples.

"Marriage is a very unique relationship between one man and one woman," he said. "Deciding what rights those couples have is the exclusive prerogative of state legislatures."

He told the audience that traditional marriage should be held in a different regard than homosexual civil unions.

"Traditional marriages are fundamental to the existence of mankind and should be treated differently," Rogers said.

The two Massachusetts natives were in a unique position to discuss gay marriage. In February 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that full marriage rights for homosexual couples was constitutional. That decision opened the door to thousands of same-sex marriages in the state.

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