

Former President Ford Calls Upon Americans to Treat Gays Equally

Now 88 years old, Ford Notes it Was a Gay Man Who Prevented Assassination Attempt Against Him

By Deb Price

Former President Gerald Ford believes the federal government should treat gay couples the same as married couples, including providing equal Social Security and tax benefits.

Ford's views, expressed in an exclusive telephone interview, make him the highest-ranking Republican ever to endorse equal treatment for gay couples.

"I think they ought to be treated equally. Period," Ford declared. Asked specifically whether gay couples should get the same Social Security, tax and other federal benefits as married couples, he replied, "I don't see why they shouldn't. I think that's a proper goal."

Now 88, Ford was a longtime Michigan congressman and Republican leader of the U.S. House before being appointed vice president and then rising to the presidency in 1974 after Richard Nixon's resignation.

From his office in Rancho Mirage, Calif., Ford comfortably discussed a range of gay issues. He said he supports federal legislation to outlaw anti-gay job discrimination: "That is a step in the right direction. I have a longstanding record in favor of legislation to do away with discrimination."

Although he doesn't know if any of his White House appointees were gay, Ford said, "I applaud that President Bush has appointed

three people who are gay. ... That is a big step in the right direction. The atmosphere was totally different 25 years ago, and the issue never arose." The former president added that having gay assistants wouldn't have mattered to him "as long as they were competent."

These days, Ford said, he and his wife Betty have gay friends.

Ford also expressed hope that his Republican Party will continue to expand its outreach to gay voters.

"I have always believed in an inclusive policy, in welcoming gays and others into the party. I think the party has to have an umbrella philosophy if it expects to win elections."

Ford warmly described his inclusive attitudes after I contacted him about what has come to be seen as a stain on his presidency — his much-criticized response to the gay man who saved his life on Sept. 22, 1975.

Three days after the thwarted assassination attempt, Ford wrote to thank Bill Sipple for his "selfless" heroism.

Yet Ford has been accused of not honoring the Vietnam combat veteran as publicly as he would have had Sipple been heterosexual.

Sipple, who had been active in San Francisco's gay movement but closeted back

home in Detroit, was rejected by his mother after a gay San Francisco official revealed Sipple's sexual orientation to a newspaper columnist after the shooting. Crumbling over his mother's rejection in the wake of national media attention, Sipple eventually died a broken man in 1989 at 47. He treasured the Ford letter, which hung in his dilapidated apartment.

Ford blasts as "untrue" and "unfair" the charge — which has become urban legend and has been repeated by some historians and gay activists — that he would have honored Sipple more publicly if he hadn't been gay. "I had gone to San Francisco to make a speech before the San Francisco foreign affairs group," Ford recalled. "I came out of the St. Francis Hotel and was about to get into the limo. The shot was fired (by Sara Jane Moore). The Secret Service got me to Air Force One quickly."

The President continued, "I later learned ... Bill Sipple hit her hand and, as a consequence, the shot went above my head. ... I wrote him a note thanking him. ... As far



as I was concerned, I had done the right thing and the matter was ended. I didn't learn until sometime later — I can't remember when — he was gay."

"I don't know where anyone got the crazy idea I was prejudiced and wanted to exclude gays," Ford said.

Gerald Ford's bold embrace of gay Americans is an historic breakthrough for a nation dedicated to equal rights. And it underscores the increasingly visible support of gay Americans by prominent Republicans.

Gay Man Wins Inheritance Rights on Appeal

Estate Case Had Barred Recovery for Same-Sex Partners

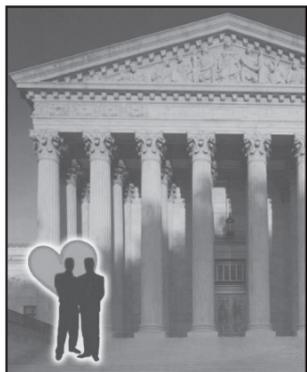
By Paul Queary, AP

Olympia, WA - Gays may be entitled to the estates of partners who die without wills, the Washington Supreme Court ruled Thursday.

The decision came as the justices ordered a new trial for Frank Vasquez, who is claiming the \$230,000 estate of his longtime partner. A lower court had found the claim invalid because same-sex marriage is illegal in Washington.

"Equitable claims are not dependent on the 'legality' of

the relationship between the parties, nor are they limited by the gender or sexual orientation of the parties," Justice Charles Johnson wrote in the unanimous decision.



Vasquez, 64, shared a house, business and financial assets with Robert Schwerzler until Schwerzler died without a will in 1995.

Vasquez claimed the estate, which consisted mainly of the house, and was challenged by

Schwerzler's siblings. The siblings said they never saw the men display affection, that Vasquez was apparently a housekeeper, and that he did not accompany Schwerzler on trips.

"They literally wanted to put Mr. Vasquez out on the street with nothing," said Terry Barnett, Vasquez's attorney. Vasquez is illiterate and disabled because of a childhood head injury, according to court records.

Ross Taylor, an attorney for Schwerzler's siblings, said he hopes to disprove Vasquez' version of the relationship at the trial, thus avoiding the question of whether he is entitled to the estate.

"My clients do not think their brother

was a homosexual," Taylor said.

A trial judge ruled that Vasquez was entitled to the property under a legal concept that protects the interests of unmarried people in long-term relationships. An appeals court reversed the decision, saying the concept does not apply to same-sex couples because they cannot legally marry.

The state's highest court rejected that conclusion but ordered a new trial because some facts of the case are in dispute.

"It's a tremendous affirmation of one of the most basic principles," said Jenny Pizer of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a gay rights organization.

On the Net: State Supreme Court: <http://www.courts.wa.gov>.

Mississippi Punishes Four-Year-Old Because He Has Lesbian Moms

Lambda Sues for A Birth Certificate for Child

By Elliot Joseph

Mississippi is refusing to issue a birth certificate to a 4-year-old boy, punishing him solely because he has been adopted by a lesbian couple. The refusal means that the child has no legal document to prove his name, the names of his parents, and his date and place of birth.

The courageous gay legal civil rights organization, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, has now filed a lawsuit against the state, demanding Mississippi provide a birth certificate to the child, as required by law. The state has refused repeated requests for the document since the child was adopted at infancy.

"The state of Mississippi is unfairly punishing this small boy by denying him his birth certificate, which is a basic necessity for everyday life. The state is harming this child simply because he was

adopted by loving parents who happen to be gay," said Lambda Deputy Legal Director Michael Adams.

Lambda argues that Mississippi is ignoring its own law that requires it to honor valid, out-of-state adoptions and provide an amended birth certificate when the adoption is complete. Singling this child out for different treatment not only creates an unlawful exception to state law and regulations, but also violates the guarantees of equal protection of the law under the Mississippi Constitution.

Cheri Goldstein and Holly Perdue took their son into their Vermont home when he was discharged from a Mississippi hospital, eight days after his birth. In April 2000 the adoption was finalized in Vermont and a request was made to have Mississippi amend the child's birth certificate to include his adoptive parents' names and his new name.

Goldstein and Perdue live with their son and six other adoptive children. They also care for two adults with severe mental retardation. Perdue has been a foster parent for 18 years and has taken care of many children with special needs. The couple have been sought out by Vermont officials when special-needs children have needed adoptive homes.

"This family is extraordinarily loving. The entire community benefits from the nurturing home they provide. Mississippi should not make life difficult for a child just because some people dislike his parents' sexual orientation," said Hector Vargas,

Regional Director for Lambda's Southern Regional Office.

Lambda is the oldest and largest legal organization dedicated to the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV and AIDS. In addition to its New York headquarters, Lambda has regional offices in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta and will open an office in Dallas in 2002.

