

Boise group's plea: Fairness for all

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There is a Boston tradition dating from John Adams' defense of British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre. Bostonians, it is said, favor a fair shake for all.

Last December, the Boston/Boise Committee was established in order that a very unpopular group, alleged "child molesters" (specifically men accused of nonviolent sex acts with adolescent boys), be assured a fair trial in court and less sensational treatment in the media. The name derives from a witch-hunt against homosexuals in Boise, Idaho, years ago that resulted from similar charges.

The committee consists of 113 men and women and 12 organizations, gay and not gay. Our goals are simple: (1) Stop the witch-hunt against gay people going on under the guise of crushing "child molestation." (2) Assure fair trials for those accused of non-violent homosexual acts and protect the rights of all persons, including alleged "victims," in such cases. (3) Ascertain the facts in such cases and get media retraction of grave errors.

The committee has not been and will not become a defense committee for the 24 men accused in unrelated cases last December. We have not spent a penny for their bond or defense, nor will we. We are a civil liberties and educational group. We seek to protect rights of gay people generally and those accused in such cases in particular.

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Our first action was to file suit against Dist. Atty. Garrett Byrne for arbitrary and prejudicial use of a so-called hotline. The district attorney invited anonymous tips about suspicious activities among men and boys. Various named and unnamed persons connected with his office spoke of "many impending arrests," "the TIP of the iceberg" and "public outrage." We believed this to be a witch-hunt against gay people.

The district attorney halted the hotline in the wake of our suit, but the witch-hunt continues. More than 200 gay men in greater Boston now face charges for nonviolent sex acts -- more than at any other time or in any other city. We have found evidence of widespread police entrapment and of threats by detectives to alleged victims to coerce testimony.

We want to see errors in the media corrected. Most of the public does not know that the alleged victims are adolescents, not children; that the rape is statutory and that no force whatsoever is alleged; that many alleged acts took place as long ago as 1971 and that police admit that some of the 24 have no connection with Revere; that not one of the 24 has pleaded guilty; that some men face multiple life sentences for alleged nonviolent sex with adolescents that

did not involve a ring, pimps or prostitution.

We have published media guidelines for such cases. There is no reason for full addresses of persons not proved guilty to be published, thus inviting violence and threats against them. The vague laws and severe penalties in this area need study. At the least, there should be a distinction in punishment between forcible and statutory rape: both carry possible life sentences.

On April 5, Gore Vidal spoke to 1500 people at the Arlington Street Church to raise money for the stated civil-liberties aims of our committee. He did not defend the 24 men arrested in December, but asserted the civil rights of the gay community. Some of the 200 gay men facing trials and their lawyers were present, as were many gay people. So were lawyers, academics, clergy, politicians, families. It is unfortunate that the only adequate coverage of this event was the unsolicited presence of Superior Court Chief Justice Robert Bonin. We believe it was important for him to hear sides of civil-liberties issues impossible for him to understand from media coverage alone, and it was certainly his right and judicial duty to attend such a meeting.

At the meeting, some other speakers and I announced our sponsorship of the National Jury Project, a group doing a

poll of the community hysteria and homophobia in connection with the 24 "Revere cases" and planning to assist in fair jury selection for those cases. This is consistent with our role as a civil-liberties committee and does not constitute direct defense of those indicted. We did not raise funds for the defendants, nor did we discuss individual cases at the meeting.

The committee may also contribute to the defense of the alleged victims and their families if trials result from allegations of police coercion.

There is an important distinction between work to assure fair trials and work to defend individuals. Our work and the statements at the meeting are in line with civil-liberties work, not defense.

Vidal spoke about the relationship between sex and politics in Boston and in America generally. He noted the extreme and sudden increase in arrests of gay men here and commented that Russia, Cuba and the communist menace are no longer popular buttons for politicians to push in election years. "Child molestation" evidently is such a button. Gay people in Boston are at present slandered by guilt through association. The Boston/Boise Committee intends to make such crude, illiberal politicking impossible in Boston in 1978.

Thomas Reeves is an officer of the Boston/Boise Committee.