

GU Settles Suit Over Rights of Gay Student Groups, Ending 8-Year Tussle

By Lawrence Feinberg
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Georgetown University agreed yesterday not to take its case against granting equal treatment to homosexual student groups to the Supreme Court, ending an eight-year legal effort to restrict gay groups on campus.

Richard Gross, a lawyer for the students, said that under the D.C. Human Rights Act, the plaintiffs would be eligible to receive \$600,000 to \$900,000 from Georgetown for legal fees.

The announcement was made three days before the deadline for seeking Supreme Court review. Lawyers for the university and the

students filed a consent order on how to implement the November ruling by the D.C. Court of Appeals that said Georgetown must give gay groups the same benefits as other student organizations, although it did not have to officially recognize them. The order was signed by D.C. Superior Court Judge Sylvia Bacon.

In January, Georgetown lost two bids for the high court to stay the ruling temporarily.

Leaders of the gay groups, which together have about 50 members at the law school and the main campus, hailed the settlement as a victory that will permit them—like other student groups—to receive university funds and hold meetings,

dances and other functions on campus.

A spokesman for the university, Law School Dean Robert Pitofsky, described the outcome as a compromise in which both sides "came away with their principles intact and their main goals achieved."

Pitofsky said the university's "core interest" was that it "not be required to endorse gay and lesbian views . . . that are inconsistent with the position of a Catholic university." Church teachings condemn homosexual acts as sinful.

Under the appeals court ruling, Georgetown was not required to recognize the gay groups officially because of its First Amendment right to exercise its religious be-

liefs. But the court said that under the D.C. Human Rights Act, the university must give the homosexual groups the same "tangible benefits" as other student organizations. The law, passed in 1977, bans discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation" and 15 other categories, including race and sex.

Yesterday's consent order, recognizing Georgetown's "Roman Catholic traditions," says the university may require the gay organizations and other groups not officially recognized to state on all announcements that their "views are not endorsed by Georgetown University." It adds that the university is not required to provide "benefits for religious worship or religious

ceremonies," an apparent reference to a decision last year to bar a homosexual Catholic organization, Dignity, from holding a weekly mass in the campus chapel.

The order says the university may not be required "to permit the use of benefits by student groups for events intended primarily for a non-university audience," a clause that Pitofsky said will prevent the university from being forced to host events "for the Washington gay community, such as a parade or festival on its grounds."

"We're very happy with what we got. Now we expect Georgetown to

live up to the settlement," Chris Ragonese, president of the Gay People of Georgetown University, said at a news conference yesterday afternoon.

The gay-student leaders and Gross toasted the agreement yesterday with Maudine R. Cooper, director the D.C. Human Rights Office, who said her staff would monitor Georgetown's compliance. Last month Cooper announced a major investigation of the university's treatment of homosexual groups.

Staff writer Linda Wheeler contributed to this report.

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Judy Mann is away. Her column will resume when she returns.