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Personal stories changed minds

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By Lisa Wangsness and Andrea Estes, Globe Staff | June 15, 2007

Representative Richard J. Ross, a Republican from Wrentham, had a revelation Wednesday afternoon after meeting with a gay Republican who presented him with this challenge: As director of his family's funeral home, Ross had surely treated every family the same, no matter what their race, religion, or sexual orientation. So why would he do anything else in his other job, as a lawmaker?

For Senator Gale Candaras, it was the 6,800 phone calls, letters, e-mails, even faxes, from her district that left no question in her mind what her constituents wanted her to do. One letter came from an 82-year-old woman who worried that one of her young grandchildren might grow up to be gay and might not be able to marry the person he loved.

Senator Michael W. Morrissey, a Democrat from Quincy, said he ignored the lobbyists and the power brokers who wanted to talk to him and sought counsel from his wife, his family, his oldest friends, and a few constituents. He made up his mind moments before walking into the House chamber yesterday.

"People's ability to be happy is fundamental," he said. "To pass judgment on that, in the end, I found hard to do."

The nine lawmakers who switched sides on gay marriage yesterday came from both parties, different parts of the state, and they traveled different ideological paths to their decision s . But in interviews yesterday, they seemed to share something in common: a desire to listen to all sides and a concern about hurting gay couples and families who they believed in many cases had experienced discrimination. The lawmakers spent hours, even days at a time during the last five months, meeting gay couples and their friends and relatives. Their personal stories made the difference more than anything else , the lawmakers said.

"I listened and I listened and I listened," said Representative Robert J. Nyman, a Democrat from Hanover who switched his vote after spending all day Tuesday meeting with constituents on the issue. "I just felt at this point, I was not comfortable putting people's human rights on the ballot."

Arline Isaacson, cochairwoman of the Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Caucus, said gay rights advocates working to defeat the amendment had put out urgent calls asking the gay community across the state to communicate directly with their lawmakers, and they did.

"It made a big difference," she said. "They were telling the story of their own lives, a story that a lot of these legislators didn't really know."

Amendment opponents also benefited from a new freshman class that proved far more receptive to gay marriage than the lawmakers they replaced. Retirements, defeats, and resignations eliminated nine of 62 lawmakers who supported the amendment in January. At least four of the newcomers were thought to be supporters of the amendment, but only two of them voted for it yesterday.

Representative Geraldo Alicea, a Democrat from Charlton, is a freshman who once promised to vote in favor of the amendment. But after he was elected, he said, "I thought it was best to be open-minded."

He spent many nights over the past five months meeting with gay and straight constituents. They included a couple who had been together for 28 years, and who, before they were married, had not been able to see each other at the hospital when one of them was seriously ill.

He also spoke to a young lesbian couple who had adopted 4-year-old twins, and he said he found it difficult to imagine casting a vote that could hurt that growing family.

Representative Paul Kujawski, a Catholic Polish-American who represents a conservative district in southern Worcester County, switched his vote after months of soul-searching.

What changed his mind, he said, was meeting a lesbian couple from his district who helped him understand what it meant to them to get married after more than two decades together.

"It was nothing more than that -- wanting people to live happily," he said.

The couple came to the State House yesterday for the vote and found Kujawski in the crowd after it was over.

"There were really no words," Kujawski said. "Just hugs and tears."

Candaras had voted for the amendment when she was a House member representing a relatively conservative district with a large number of elderly people in Hampden County; now that she is a senator, she said, her new, much larger constituency made its sentiment clear to her.

Some constituents wrote saying that they had changed their minds, like the elderly woman who said she previously asked Candaras to support the ban.

"But since then, Gale," the woman wrote, as Candaras told it, "this lovely couple, these two men, moved in next door to me, and they have a couple of children and they're married, and they help me with my lawn. And if they can't be married in Massachusetts, they're going to leave -- and then who would help me with my lawn?"

Candaras said that after living with gay marriage for three years, many Massachusetts residents have grown accustomed to it, even those who once had reservations.

"It's a cultural change, and for older people, it is a difficult cultural change," she said. "But I think people are coming to understand the issue and coming to appreciate the fact that the world is changing -- and that these people deserve to enjoy . . . the same rights of marriage." ■