

Andrew Chirls Is the New Head of the Philly Bar Association

Not that there's anything wrong with that

Andrew Chirls never wanted to be known as a gay lawyer. He sees himself as a lawyer who just happens to be gay. But like it or not, as the newly installed chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, he is one of the most visible leaders of the gay community. And he isn't shirking the responsibility.

"Hey, look, it's going to be an interesting time to serve," he says, "what with these issues of gay marriage and equality that have risen to the front line."

The 49-year-old partner at Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen was appointed to the position in January. It was a groundbreaking event for the gay community. "Not only was it a first for the Philadelphia Bar, it was a first for any bar association in America," he says, emphasizing that he is the first *openly* gay man elected bar association leader.

Chirls realizes that during his one-year term he will be regarded primarily as "the gay lawyer." But he refuses to let this define his priorities. He has a number of goals on his agenda — among them, improving access to the courts for immigrants, strengthening the bar's international outlook and obtaining more resources for the legal system.

"To be truly effective, I have to focus on all of the issues," he explains. "The Philadelphia Bar Association has 13,000 members, and if I put gay rights at the top of the agenda, then I'd be doing a big disservice."

So far, the gay rights issue hasn't even surfaced. For a reason. "Most of the problems have already been solved," Chirls says. For instance, in its unanimous decision earlier this year, the

Pennsylvania Supreme Court upheld Philadelphia's extension of spousal benefits to gay and lesbian city employees with registered domestic partnerships. The decision reversed a state appeals court's finding that the city went beyond its authority in creating a new marital status.

"We're way ahead of a lot of other places on gay rights issues," Chirls says. "The city ordinances and the bar association's personnel policies are what they should be, and the availability of insurance company coverage for domestic partners has been around for employees of legal organizations for 12 years."

Some of these benefits can be directly traced to Chirls' activities and efforts. In 1989, he became the first openly gay member of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, an agency that adjudicates discrimination claims and arbitrates racial disputes. In 1997, he helped establish the Philadelphia Bar Association's Committee on the Legal Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men. Chirls also played a large part in getting Philadelphia's 25 largest law firms to endorse a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual minorities.

Chirls does not consider himself all that confrontational. Friends and acquaintances describe him as affable, soft-spoken, enthusiastic and approachable — easily drawn in to a conversation about music, baseball, books, bird-watching or world travel. "I am

BY DAN HARVEY

PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY MARCUS

A BROAD AGENDA

Although Chirls is the first openly gay elected head of a major bar association, he minimizes the role his sexual identity will play in his tenure. "To be truly effective, I have to focus on all the issues," he says.



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not one of those people who get into fights. The gay rights movement, like every political movement, needs its people who work the insides wearing blue suits as well as its rock throwers, and I happen to be in the former category," he says. "That helps me talk to people who may not otherwise be receptive."

This approach has helped him accomplish many things on a front where harsh confrontation would seem *de rigueur*. While obtaining his law degree at the Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California in Berkeley in the late 1970s, he was an advocate in several gay rights issues. And he later served for six years on the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's national board. Lambda is a national organization that seeks full recognition of the civil rights for the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) community and people with HIV or AIDS.

Stacey Sobel, executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights, has witnessed Chirls' selfless efforts toward the cause, and she realizes the impact he'll have in his current leadership role. "Andrew has done pro bono work in a number of important cases that have impacted gay and lesbian issues," she says. "As chancellor of the bar association, he brings a new face to the larger community and broadens their vision of what a lawyer is and the types of cases a lawyer takes."

One of Chirls' most significant cases came when he successfully tried the first jury case in Pennsylvania concerning discrimination based on AIDS or HIV status. Chirls represented the mother of a young man who died of AIDS in 1984. The mother of the deceased asked the funeral director if he would perform

a funeral for someone who had died of AIDS. The funeral director agreed but told the mother that the law required the casket be closed. This wasn't true. Furthermore, during the ceremony, she learned that the casket was actually empty and her son's body was in another casket outside the funeral home. The director didn't want to bring an HIV-infected body into the facility. The case was tried in 1989, and the jury awarded the mother \$75,000 in compensatory damages for emotional distress and \$100,000 in punitive damages due to breach of promise. As Chirls says, "You only get one funeral, and the family has a right to expect that it will be done right and according to the announced plan."

That experience almost led to work for Chirls as a consultant on the 1991 movie *Philadelphia*, but the filmmakers backed off when they learned that Chirls had not heard of Jonathan Demme, the film's director. Which isn't surprising considering Chirls didn't own a TV or VCR. But that's not to say that he's wholly uninformed about film. Movies profoundly influenced his career direction.

Chirls had entered the University of Pennsylvania with the intention of becoming an architect. But the law was constantly in the back of his mind since childhood, when he saw *Inherit the Wind*, which featured Spencer Tracy's charismatic portrayal of a Clarence Darrow-like lawyer. "A part of me always wanted to be a lawyer ... I like words," says Chirls, a literature buff self-schooled in the classics. "I like persuasion and the give-and-take of argument. I liked the idea that there is a set of rules that you can operate under whereby if you are right and you are convincing, you can get your way. It's something different than just a raw

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LIFE PARTNERS

Right: Chirls and Larry Frankel, the Pennsylvania ACLU's legislative director, vacationing at Niagara Falls

Below: Chirls and Frankel walk down the aisle before exchanging vows and wedding bands in a civil ceremony in September 2003



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