



Equal Rights

The Struggle For Equal Rights For All of Alaska's Citizens Is Not A New One

In 1945 a state senator from Juneau, speaking on an anti-discrimination bill, said, "Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites, with 5000 years of civilization behind us?" Elizabeth Peratrovich, who was the guiding force behind the bill, responded by saying, "I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind the gentlemen with five thousand years of recorded civilization behind them of our bill of rights." Peratrovich's remarks are credited with pushing Alaska's Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945, one of the first anti-discrimination laws in a United States territory through to passage.

Our constitution's promise of equal protection under the law is still in the process of fulfillment. It seems as though each generation must renew the effort, expanding the boundaries of equality through activism, political discourse, or civil disobedience.

A few years ago the civil rights issue being discussed in Juneau was whether same sex couples should enjoy the same rights as heterosexual couples. In 2005 the Alaska Supreme Court ruled unanimously that they should, but some legislators objected, and in 2006 they introduced measures to amend our constitution to shrink the meaning of 'equal protection under the law.' I fought that measure as a member of the Judiciary Committee and I fought it again when it came up for a vote before the full Senate. The debate spilled over into 2007, when an advisory vote asking whether our constitution should be amended was placed on the ballot statewide and it narrowly passed. In response another constitutional amendment was introduced in the Legislature, and I was proud to help other like-minded legislators defeat it.

This year's effort to expand the meaning of 'equal protection' was the ordinance passed by the Anchorage Assembly that would have prohibited discrimination in jobs and housing based on sexual orientation, much the same way that discrimination is prohibited based on race, gender, age and religion. As we all know, the measure was vetoed by Mayor Sullivan and the Assembly



was one vote short of an override. That setback for the civil rights of Alaska's citizens will someday be righted; perhaps through a citizen's initiative, or perhaps through the election of a new mayor, or through the election of one more equal-rights minded assembly member.

Thus, the struggle goes on. The tide of history is clear, though. We are on the right side of this issue, and we will prevail.