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News Tips

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Nashville PFLAG takes on phone company giant

BellSouth's 'Real Yellow Pages' denies a request by a gay rights activist to create a listing for gay organizations

by AMY MORRISON

Have you ever tried to look up a gay listing in BellSouth's "The Real Yellow Pages?" Wayne Rosing has, and what he could not find there launched him into a 3-year struggle with the phone company.

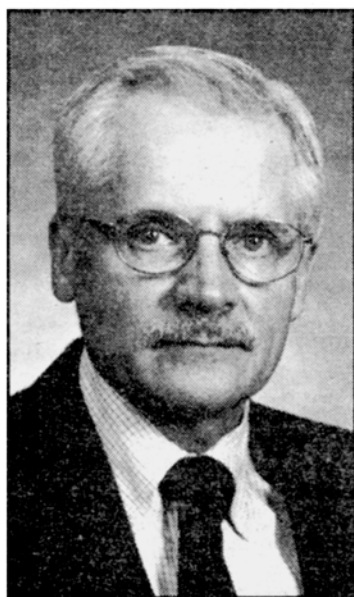
In 1997, Rosing, a 53-year old biology professor at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, became co-chair of Nashville PFLAG.

The chapter, which had been sustained for 10 years by a small group of supporters, had become empowered by the late 1990s glut of gay celebrity outings and increased media attention to gay issues, and decided to re-organize.

As a part of this process, PFLAG established a telephone hotline in the hopes that area residents, particularly parents, would have a positive place to turn when loved one came out.

With the hotline number began the trouble.

Acquiring a business phone number entitled PFLAG to a listing in both the business white



Nashville resident Wayne Rosing has pushed BellSouth to list the city's PFLAG chapter in its 'Real Yellow Pages' under a gay listing but the company has denied his request.

pages and the yellow pages. The white pages listing wasn't a problem. The organization is listed alphabetically with its acronym and is also spelled out as Parents Families & Friends of Lesbians And Gays.

But the listing in the yellow pages presented an obstacle.

BellSouth's "The Real Yellow Pages" does not have a heading for Gay & Lesbian Service Organizations. For that matter, there are no headings even remotely gay-related.

"We should be right there between gauges and gazebos, as it turns out," Rosing said in a recent phone interview from his Murfreesboro, Tenn. home.

Instead, PFLAG is currently listed under Social Service Organizations, among more than 100 other groups, a scenario that is not satisfactory to Rosing.

"We simply want to be listed where a number of parents tell us they looked first, under 'gay' in the yellow pages," Rosing said.

What began on Rosing's part as a polite effort to establish a new heading in the yellow pages has degenerated into battle of wills, he said.

Rosing was told initially that he could petition to have Gay & Lesbian Services Organizations included as a new heading, provided he show documentation of other phone companies with similar listings.

Bell Atlantic and Pacific Bell both provide such headings, Rosing said.

"The heading structure of the yellow pages is constantly changing along with the community it serves," says Phil Santoro, a Bell Atlantic spokesman. "Times change, and what makes sense to the consumer changes. Our business is to connect consumers with advertisers."

Having established a precedent in other phone books, Rosing then had to find several other gay organizations in Nashville interested in being listed under the same heading.

Getting the proper forms from BellSouth also was difficult, but in



Whether you are looking under 'G' for 'Gay' or 'H' for 'Homosexual,' you won't find it in BellSouth's 'The Real Yellow Pages,' a fact that has prompted the Nashville chapter of PFLAG to take on the phone company.

February 1998, Rosing submitted PFLAG's request to the company. Nearly eight months and a new phone book later, BellSouth denied Rosing's request in a letter.

"As a matter of general applicable policy, we no longer establish headings that refer to diseases, ailments or cater to a specific agency, group of individuals or organizations," Myra McClendon, an administrator for BellSouth, wrote in the letter.

BellSouth asserts that its policy is not intended to discriminate, but is based on practical concerns. The company argues that if the door is opened for one group, it will face an onslaught of requests for new headings.

But in the letter, BellSouth did tell Rosing and PFLAG that it would cross reference the gay listing with a "see Associations; also Social Service Organizations; Also Clubs" reference. But each July for the last two years, the new edition of BellSouth's "The Real Yellow Pages" didn't contain the reference.

When asked about the listing this week, BellSouth officials responded, via fax, saying that the

company has been waiting for more than a year for Rosing to answer whether the cross-reference listing was acceptable.

"The next correspondence we had from our customer indicating that a cross-reference heading was acceptable to him was this year," BellSouth Manager Karen Williams wrote in the fax. "Unfortunately it was past the deadline to get the cross-reference heading established in the book that has just been delivered."

BellSouth serves nine Southern states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

But last month, Rosing received an e-mail from a BellSouth representative apologizing for the delay in publishing the cross-reference and assuring him it would appear—without any action on his part—in the July 2001 yellow pages.

The problems Rosing faced with BellSouth over its yellow pages may be symptomatic of a larger problem, said Harry Knox, executive director of the Georgia Equality Project, the statewide

gay political group.

"They are among the nine companies that we have targeted for domestic partner benefits who could be and should be providing them, but are not," Knox said.

While BellSouth does include sexual orientation in its non-discrimination clause, Knox said many gay and lesbian employees said they face an uncomfortable working environment because of their sexual orientation.

The company, though, does promote diversity, according to Chairman and CEO Duane Ackerman, who issued a press re-lease in July that defended the company.

"We believe that promoting diversity is essential to our success. We also recognize that a diverse workplace makes for a broader, richer environment that produces more creative thinking and solutions, resulting in a stronger company," Ackerman said.

Rosing, meanwhile, continues to write letters, make calls and send e-mails after each disappointing July.

His frustration has led him to consult with attorneys and write to the NAACP, which has listed BellSouth among its top 25 Best Companies for Minorities. He is also considering a plea to the ACLU.

"Am I to assume that 'our' community is content to have our own separate 'Gay Yellow Pages,' or pink pages? We should be in the regular phone book along with everybody else," Rosing said.

"This thing has turned into a comedy of errors that isn't so funny anymore," he said.

ACTION! info

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