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# First Friday News & Views

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## A LIFE WORTHY OF EMULATION

by Jonathan Wilson



Jonathan Wilson

**B**ut for his untimely death at age 32 as an early victim of the AIDS epidemic, Dr. Robert K. Stark's life was one to be envied. A graduate of Rutgers and Tulane University Medical School, he was a gifted ophthalmology surgeon who was equally comfortable and competent as an auto mechanic. The latter talent actually helped him gain admission to medical school.

He had driven from New Jersey to Tulane for his admissions interview and around Atlanta experienced brake trouble. He made a temporary fix, but upon arrival at his cousin's home in New Orleans he undertook to replace the brake master cylinder. Later, during his interview, the interviewing doctor asked him if he'd had a chance to see much of the city. He said he hadn't because he was preoccupied fixing the brakes on his car. Intrigued, the doctor described a particular car noise and asked Bobby to diagnose the problem. Bobby asked a few questions and then gave a step-by-step analysis of the problem and needed repair. The doctor's response, "That's pretty much what my mechanic told me, only he wasn't as thoroughly analytical. Congratulations, you're in."

Bobby was a member of the Windy City Gay Chorus and a concert-caliber pianist. He enjoyed micro-origami and, in the course of a conversation, he could generate a barely visible origami figure seemingly without effort. He was well-read and particularly enjoyed the works of the 1920s parodist-poet, Samuel Hoffenstein. Bobby spoke English of course, but also Yiddish and Spanish, and a bit of Russian.

An anecdote that ranks among my favorites occurred while Dr. Stark lay on his deathbed. He was being pestered by a well-intentioned—if misguided—Filipino nurse who said to him, "Dr. Stark, maybe it's time for you to find Jesus." Bobby pulled the oxygen mask aside long enough to ask, "Did they lose him AGAIN?" She left him alone after that.

Bobby's mother grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, and graduated from Morningside College and the University of Iowa, both of my alma maters. His brother, Peter A. Stark, makes memorial contributions to the scholarship fund of the First Friday Breakfast Club. I wanted this article to make those memorials more meaningful by introducing Dr. Robert K. Stark to the members and friends of FFBC. I speculate that if those who knew and loved him had been offered the opportunity to have him in their lives for only 32 years or not at all, they'd have taken those 32 years. Sadly, that's all they got.

But Bobby Stark, made the most of the life that he had. He excelled with di-

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### CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, December 5, 2008 at Hoyt Sherman Place.
- Our guest speaker will be David Miles, Chair of the Iowa Board of Regents
- ▼ R.S.V.P. by Wednesday, December 3 to [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or 288-2500 by phone.

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verse talents and related compassionately to people from every walk of life. He suffered from bad timing; born too soon, he died before more effective AIDS treatments could be developed. None of us knows how long we have; Bobby Stark stands as an example of making the most of it while we can. His is an example worth emulating, as is the example set by his brother in making contributions to the FFBC scholarship fund.

In honor of Dr. Stark I'll close with this quote from Samuel Hoffenstein, "Somewhere there is someone that dreams of your smile, and finds in your presence that life is worthwhile, so when you are lonely remember it's true, someone somewhere is thinking of you." ▼

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*Fully one fourth of teenage girls in the US are infected with an STD. So much for abstinence education.*

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**GLBT  
Youth in  
Iowa**



**Schools Task Force:**

**Past, Present, and Future**

**N**ate Monson, an obviously talented and energetic young man who heads the GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force, appeared before the FFBC to tell about the origins of the Task Force, the focus of its mission, and the work that it has accomplished thus far.

The Task Force was born of the growing number of harassment complaints received by the Iowa Civil Rights Commission for which there was no remedy because sexual orientation and gender identity were not protected characteristics. The critical need for education on the most basic GLBT issues managed to cross paths with Nate's commitment to work in that arena because of an anti-gay flyer he received in college that prompted him to come out, with a vengeance.

The Task Force has been instrumental in the adoption by the Iowa Legislature in 2007 of legislation directed toward assuring harassment-free schools, including sexual orientation and gender identity among 17 protected categories. It has also been helpful in the adoption of the companion amendment to the Iowa Civil Rights Act to include those two



categories for protection.

Together, those successes have increased the need for education, particularly among Iowa educators, and therein lies the focus of the Task Force mission today.

Nate recounted some moving anecdotes from his experiences conducting training sessions all over the state of Iowa among school teachers and administrators. He has been impressed, but not surprised, by the level of ignorance that exists on the most basic of GLBT issues. He has learned that slick power point presentations aren't the most effective approach, and he involved those in attendance in a hands on teaching/learning exercise that he uses and has found to be more effective because it personalizes the subject matter.

The Task Force, in addition to financial assistance, invites participation by volunteers. He can be contacted at [nate@iowasafeschools.org](mailto:nate@iowasafeschools.org) or 515-243-1221.

—Jonathan Wilson

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*He wondered why the baseball was getting bigger.  
Then it hit him.*

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**The Secret  
Life of Bees**

**Review by Gary  
Kaufman**

**T**he Secret Life of Bees begins by showing 14-year old

Lily Owens' recurring vision of the day that she saw her mother and father fighting while Lily was hiding in the closet. There was a scuffle, a gun was dropped, and 4-year old Lily accidentally killed her mother. This became her only memory of her mother. "My mother," said Lily, "was the one thing I wanted most, and I took her away. Nothing pretty much mattered after that."

Her father had no love for anything and regularly disciplined Lily by making her kneel bare-legged on a pile of grits poured out on the floor. Lily is required to kneel on the grits until her knees bled. When Lily's

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housekeeper, Rosaleen Daise (played by Jennifer Hudson), is beaten by three white men while she is heading to register to vote after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, she was arrested by the police for causing the disturbance, and Lily decides to rescue Rosaleen from the hospital. The two take off on a journey to find out the truth about Lily's mother—had she deserted her as her heartless father claimed, or had she come back for Lily? Lily felt that she must have come back for Lily, because Lily believed she must have had at least one parent who loved her.

Lily is played expertly by child actress Dakota Fanning. It is unusual to see such clarity of emotions from a child actress recounting a rather adult tale.

Luck falls upon Lily when she happens upon the Boatwright household led by August Boatwright, warmly played by Queen Latifah. August Boatwright is a very successful black entrepreneur; she has her own business selling honey, and it just happens to be the best honey in South Carolina. She takes in Lily and Rosaleen and allows them to sleep in the honey house. August lives in a large, ostentatiously painted house. The household is a very sophisticated one with a formal parlor in which classical music is often performed. August has two sisters living with her in the home. June (Alicia Keys) is the most independent-minded one who plays the cello beautifully and often. May, the other sister, once had a twin sister, April, who unfortunately died, and May has never been herself since. May takes all the pain in the world upon herself and just barely holds it together. Unfortunately, there is a lot of pain in this world.

This film shows that, even in 1964, racial hatred was very real and the South was a very dangerous place for blacks. Lily strikes up a friendship with a young black man, Neil (played by a very handsome Nate Parker), who aspires to become an attorney. When Lily joins Nate to watch a movie by sitting with him in the blacks-only balcony section of a movie theater, white men seize him, and Nate is not seen for a long time—he was severely beaten.

The film emphasizes the strength of these women to live independently and successfully. It is a female empowering film. I strongly recommend seeing it. It has real emotional strength.

I also like how the film reminds us of how far the United States has progressed in our own lifetimes. In just 44 years, the United States has gone from a society unapologetically persecuting and discriminating against people of the black race, to a society that has elected a black man as its President. Do you suppose that 44 years from now the United States will be electing its first mar-

ried gay man as its President—imagine what a wingding the Radical Right will have with the “First Lady!” And, hopefully, we will take the lead set by Palin and have our own “First Dude.” One can only hope! ▼



## Save the date! February 6, 2009

An evening of fun, music and wine in the spirit of Valentine's Day! Benefitting the First Friday Breakfast Club scholarship fund.

**Guest Speaker:**

Alice Hoagland, mother of 911 hero Mark Bingham

Also, participate in a silent auction and “Best Dressed in Red” contest.

Hoyt Sherman Place

6 PM to 9 PM

A \$25 Minimum Donation Will Be Requested at the door for all donors not responding earlier.

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*“We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us happy is something to be enthusiastic about.”*  
Charles Kingsley

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## BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the December 5 meeting no later than December 3. E-mail [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or call him at 288-2500. Our speaker will be David Miles, Chair of the Iowa Board of Regents.



December 9, 2008, is the date of the scheduled hearing before the Iowa Supreme Court in the same-gender marriage appeal. It's scheduled for 9:00 a.m. The public can attend in person or watch the one hour hearing live on the Iowa Supreme Court website.



Thanks to Scott Stevens for his introduction of our November speaker, Nate Monson, Executive Director of the GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force.

# Racism and Homopho- bia

by  
Jonathan Wilson



**M**uch has been made, and will continue to be made, of the historic election of an African-American as President of the United States. It is undeniably a milestone, but not of the magnitude that Jonathan Narcisse would have you believe in an article published in the Des Moines Register. Citing the election outcome, the examples of Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey and, implicitly, himself for his election to the Des Moines School Board, he stretches to the conclusion that we no longer need affirmative action. In so doing he confuses progress in a journey with the destination. He demonstrates the calloused and fallacious philosophy that says once I've made it, the ladder should be pulled up behind me. He's not the first to do that; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas beat him to it. They both fail to understand the real justification and purpose for affirmative action in the first place.

Affirmative action has its legitimate origins in slavery and emancipation. It has to do with having put generations behind the proverbial eight ball and recurring cycles of disadvantage, and committing as a nation to doing something affirmative to rectify it. It has to do with tolerating too long folks born on third base who grow up thinking they hit a triple. It has to do with making right, over time—too much time—a national shame and the residual consequences it has had, and continues to have, for people of color—real people, not the remarkable exceptions, caught in cycles of stereotyped prejudice and poverty. That we have made progress and that there are examples of a few who have successfully escaped and achieved by everyone's enviable standards, does not mean “game over.”

It does flatter the American electorate that Barack Obama has been elected President of the United States, but only about enough to neutralize the disgrace of the same electorate having *re-elected* George W. Bush four years ago. It is sadly telling and compelling that it took a virtually flawless campaign to elect Obama in what should, under the circumstances, have been a near lay down for anyone NOT a Republican. Requiring such over-achievement in order to achieve what obviously should have happened is actually evidence that people of color still need to mow the lawn more often in order for people to think they are mowing as often as white folks. While that remains true, we still need affirmative action. Residual prejudice should keep affirmative action alive. When the former goes away, finally, so can the latter.

*“On the companion journeys to a color blind society and one free of heterosexism, there will be daily ups and downs. The ups are increasingly happening more often and more impressively for both.”*

It is instructive that in the same election that elevated Obama to the presidency, California, a state he won in a landslide, adopted Proposition 8. That initiative purported to adopt a critical exception to the California Constitutional guarantee of equality among all law-abiding citizens. Progress on racism and homophobia are inextricably connected. Prop 8 was opposed by Obama and even by California **Republican** Governor Schwarzenegger. And, in an unprecedented act on a par with his very election as President, Obama actually mentioned the legitimacy of gay citizens in his speech accepting his well-deserved victory.

On the companion journeys to a color blind society and one free of heterosexism, there will be daily ups and downs. The ups are increasingly happening more often and more impressively for both. They are increasingly more empowering in both causes. The direction of the tide is increasingly indisputable for both. The destination, rather than merely milestones along the way, is more and more clearly in sight. If we make the mistake of confusing the milestones for the destination, we'll find ourselves dead in the water. Fortunately most of the oppressed are not so blind as Narcisse and his ilk on either subject. ▼

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*President Bush likes being known for talking tough. Did you ever wonder how tough he'd talk if he were subjected to “enhanced” interrogation techniques like waterboarding?*

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*Statistically, females in the military who are sent to Iraq are at greater risk of sexual assault by their fellow soldiers than they are of being killed by the enemy.*

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## Meeting Cancellation Policy (2009)

**A**s we approach the winter season, you should be reminded of the Meeting Cancellation Policy and Procedures developed by the FFBC Board of Directors.

The decision to cancel a meeting will be made by 6:00 P.M. the day prior to the meeting. An attempt by the board to notify the members of the cancellation will be made as soon as possible following the decision to cancel. The following methods will be used to contact the members:

- ◆ An email will be sent to all members.
- ◆ For those who have provided an RSVP for the meeting, and when a current telephone number is available, the board will make phone calls.
- ◆ The web server will be contacted to post the notice.
- ◆ Local radio stations will be contacted. Some stations may announce cancellations while others list cancellations on their web site.

It is recognized that there may be situations when these notification methods may not be totally effective. If you are aware of anticipated bad weather, feel free to contact a board member to ascertain if the meeting is being held. ▼

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know it is time to rally around the flags once more.

It is my opinion that this is a blatant disrespect for the artifacts entrusted to SHSI by the citizens of Iowa. This isn't the first incident either. Items belonging to General Samuel Curtis (saddles and other accoutrements from the ACW) were near being lost and would have been had it not been for Laura Lee and Sheila intervening, reporting and demanding preservation of these articles. They of course met with harassment and illegitimate interference to prevent their disclosure. The curators responsible had only one response, "We don't need them, we have more." (I paraphrase). I remind you that this is not their place to respond in such a manner as they are trusted agents of the STATE! They are required to act competently to preserve the artifacts they take into the museum as treasures not as personal property. This also lies in the shadow that thousands of artifacts cannot be accounted for or even located. Thousands. Not just one or two but thousands of treasures, memories that Iowans have dedicated to their care. Please don't be fooled by the "professionals" there. Because of Laura Lee's and Sheila's efforts and selfless devotion the project has lasted this long. Now because of the hungry ego of these same "professionals" the project now stands on the brink of eradication. They can no longer go it alone. They have risked their credibility, peace of mind and even their jobs to protect those flags. The Iowa Civil War dead would be proud of their efforts, please don't let their sacrifices and the sacrifices of our ancestral heritage go in vain. Write someone, anyone, a plea to save the flags. Laura Lee and Sheila have been given a gag order but I will rot in hell before someone says my wife can't speak to me on such matters. If you have questions or need more information please call me or write me.

I am your obedient servant.

Ben Ramirez  
15<sup>th</sup> Iowa Vol Int  
3<sup>rd</sup> Iowa Cav (Dismounted)

*If you have any interest in preserving these priceless Civil War battle flags, I urge you to contact you state representative or state senator and insist that the money they allocated for the conservation of the flags be used for that purpose and no other! (Since this article was written, I have learned from a reliable authority that the proposed exhibition of unconserved flags is on hold, and the allocated money for the flags remains in place. —ed.)*

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*The Donald Trump maxim: If you don't run out of money before you die, there's no discernible difference between being loved for your money or loved for who you are.*

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# FFBC

*First Friday  
News & Views  
Des Moines, Iowa*

*DECEMBER 2008*

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## From the Editor

### Iowa's Battle Flags Attacked!

Three years ago, the FFBC membership was treated to a moving presentation regarding the conservation and preservation of Iowa's Civil War battle flags. Two of the presenters were Sheila Hanke, supervisor of the battle flag conservation effort, and Laura Lee Ramirez, assistant conservator at the Iowa Museum of History. I regret to report that the battle flag collection faces a threat from enemies within the museum itself. Laura Lee's husband, Ben Ramirez, is a member of the Iowa National Guard, a Civil War Re-enactor, and an ordained minister. It is with his permission that I offer his letter of October 31 to members of the Fifteenth Iowa Group. Ben can be reached by e-mail at [benramirez1@mchsi.com](mailto:benramirez1@mchsi.com).

Gentlemen,

It has finally happened. The Battle Flag Project funding has been raided by the Curators and Middle Management of the State Historical Society. They raided the money to use it in establishing another ACW (*American Civil War—ed.*) project. The problem is that Federal money has been earmarked for each state to fund such a project so there was no need to do such a thing. Please understand what this means. All of the money that the Iowa Legislature set aside for the conservation of the flags and all of the money that many of us have helped to raise for the conservation of the flags has been taken. The budget now has less than \$1,000 for operating expenses until July 2009. Those who have done this are informing outsiders that this will benefit the flags and that because of this move 30+ flags will go on display. They have told others that displaying them in an unconserved condition will create support for the flags. This is exactly the problem...none of the flags going on display have been conserved and since the money was moved they can't be. So their plan to place the flags on display, without conservation, will cause further damage to them and accelerate their decay. This is tantamount to starting your house on fire to get the attention of the fire department. If you have no confidence in Laura Lee or Sheila then I would offer you the Textile Preservation Association who did the original assessment of the conditions of the flags and the only appropriate response... conservation. The grass roots efforts and legislators aware of the report understood the credibility of the TPA and moved mountains to initiate the conservation effort. Now at the hands of only a few, all of this has gone to waste and worse yet, by neglect more damage will occur to the battle flags if no action is taken. We can get information from the inside but Laura Lee and Sheila have to sit this one out. The threatening behavior against them is more than they can stand up against and all of their efforts to resolve this peaceably have failed. I will be writing e-mails to Senators and Representatives to ask for their intervention and I implore you to do the same. I also ask that you spread this information to as many interested parties as you can think of and let them know and let them

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