Lobbyist talks on hatred



Stacey Cooper/NT Daily

Diane Hardy-Garcia, executive director of the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas, spoke Wednesday.

By Lisa L. Rollins
Staff Writer

Only by personalizing the issue of hate crimes will Texans be able to achieve stronger hate-crime legislation, Diane Hardy-Garcia, executive director for the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas, said Wednesday.

A crowd of about 100 people attended Hardy-Garcia's 3 p.m. lecture in the University Union's Silver Eagle Suite, where all were encouraged to apply a personal approach to helping enact harsher laws against those who commit hate crimes in Texas.

Plano senior Scot Maitland, vice president of Courage, which co-sponsored the lecture with the University Program Council, said Hardy-Garcia was selected to speak because her message was for everyone, not just lesbians and gays.

"We thought this would be a good opportunity for NT as a whole, because hate crimes aren't just committed against gays and lesbians, but all minorities, from women to the elderly," Maitland said.

Hardy-Garcia said she became involved in lobbying for harsher hate-crime legislation after it was brought to her attention that Nicholas West, the 17-year-old son of a Texas minister, was murdered in his hometown park by three men because he was gay.

Because the media and society didn't seem to initially notice West's murder, Hardy-Garcia was motivated to take action, she said. In turn, she organized a rally against hate crimes in the same park where West was murdered to draw attention to the tragedy and the need for change in Texas law.

"You would think that with Nicholas West's murder there would be a reaction, but it was a reserved place where Nicholas lived," Hardy-Garcia said. "But we knew that by bringing 1,500 (people) to rally it would bring national attention to the murder."

Hardy-Garcia's efforts on behalf of hate-crime victims did not end with West's hometown rally. Instead, she has made it her life's work to publicize the injustices of the Texas legislative system regarding victims' rights by lobbying for stricter punishments against those who kill because of prejudices and hatred.

Hardy-Garcia said the Jewish community in Texas was among the first to petition the Texas Legislature for tougher laws against those who commit hate-crimes, followed by members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

However, "Everyone has been defeated because of us (gays and lesbians), because sexual orientation is carried in it," she said, regarding the respective groups' lobbying efforts.

"Hate crimes against the gay and lesbian community is the fastest growing, but certainly the largest group who are affected by it is African Americans in Texas," she said. "And if you take crimes against women and add it all together, no one would surpass that.

"Hate crimes terrorize whole groups of people," she said. "If a hate crime is committed against a rabbi it doesn't just affect him, it affects the whole Jewish community."

Hardy-Garcia said 11.3 percent of the hate crimes in Texas were committed on the because of the victim's sexual orientation. That percentage jumped to 16.2 percent in 1994, she said.

Additionally, while hate crimes committed because of religious affiliation and those committed against African Americans are declining, hate crimes against ethnic groups such as Latin Americans have increased, Hardy-Garcia said.

"Violence is always, always, always wrong," she said. "And in Texas, there's a tremendous underreporting.

"Officers don't know how to deal with this, and lesbians and gays don't always trust the police and expect to be discriminated against. But officers need to be trained on how to deal with (hate-crime) issues sensitively."

Hardy-Garcia has successfully taken her cause to the ABC TV network, where reporters for the nation

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al news show "PrimeTime Live" put a spotlight on Texas' growing hate-crime problem, focusing on the growing number of murders of young gay men.

Hardy-Garcia said 14 gay men have been murdered in hate-crime slayings in Texas since 1990, with eight of the murders occurring in '94.

Hardy-Garcia encouraged all to take a pledge to help end hate crimes in Texas by filling out a card for the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas.