

DECEMBER 16, 1999

# Bad Connection

## BellSouth rejects pleas of gay support group

BY JEFF WOODS

**T**hey thought their request was simple enough. But after more than a year of asking, members of the Nashville chapter of Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) still haven't persuaded BellSouth to list their organization where it logically seems to belong in the Yellow Pages.

The Yellow Pages don't have a special heading for gay and lesbian service organizations, and BellSouth won't establish one and list PFLAG under it. Instead, the phone company insists on listing PFLAG, a support group for the families of gay people, under social service organizations with more than 100 other groups.

Explaining BellSouth's policy in a per-

functory letter to PFLAG a month ago, the phone company's Myra McClendon lumped homosexuality with illnesses, at least as far as the Yellow Pages are concerned.

"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," wrote McClendon, BellSouth's specifications, standards, and ethics administrator.

PFLAG says BellSouth is making it hard for parents to find the group's phone number (615 366-0888) when they're seeking help and information after learning that their children are gay. PFLAG has a listing under its own name in the phone book's white pages, but members say many parents don't know the group's name. These parents are more likely to look under "gays" in the Yellow Pages, group members say.

"We aren't trying to stir up controversy, but we are trying to let people know that we exist," says PFLAG co-chair Wayne Rosing, a biology professor at Middle Tennessee State University.

BellSouth has stuck to its policy even as PFLAG has pointed out that phone companies in other regions of the country—including Bell Atlantic and Pacific Bell—list gay and lesbian service organizations under that heading in their Yellow Pages.

In its one concession to PFLAG, BellSouth has agreed to include such a heading in the Yellow Pages, but not to list any organizations under it.

Callers who went to the "G" page of the directory would encounter a cross reference under Gay and Lesbian Service Organization reading, "See Associations; Also Social Service Organizations, Also Clubs." If they flipped to the "A" page to

search through more than 100 associations listed there, they wouldn't find PFLAG. They'd have to go to the "S" page and hunt under social service organizations, where PFLAG is listed.

"That's not a very customer-friendly solution," Rosing points out. "People will have to be clairvoyant to find us or really persistent."

BellSouth says its policy is a matter of practicality. If the Yellow Pages gave in to one group, it would attract a legion of such requests for special listings, officials say.

"For instance, the KKK or the NAACP, we wouldn't do it for them either," BellSouth spokesman Hal Hayes says.

But Rosing says he suspects BellSouth is catering to homophobics and others in the company's Bible-Belt region who might object to the listing of gay advocacy groups under a special heading.

To advertise its existence, PFLAG has resorted to billboards, placing two around Nashville. That in itself hasn't been free of controversy. Vandals defaced one billboard, which carried the message, "Someone You Know and Love is Gay!" PFLAG has also received a number of obscene phone calls about the billboards, Rosing says. The group's other billboard reads: "What If Someone Called Your Child Fa\*g#t? Hate Speech Hurts Everybody."

PFLAG filed a complaint in August with the Federal Communications Commission over its Yellow Pages listing. The FCC hasn't responded. It regulates phone companies, but it's unclear whether it has any authority over the Yellow Pages.

"We simply want to be listed where a number of parents tell us they looked first, namely under 'gay' in the Yellow Pages," Rosing says. ■

