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Washington sues florist who said no to a same-sex wedding

April 10, 2013 | By Kim Murphy

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SEATTLE — The Washington attorney general has filed a consumer protection action against an eastern Washington florist who refused to provide flowers for a same-sex wedding, telling a longtime customer that it was “because of my relationship with Jesus Christ.”

The lawsuit seeks \$2,000 in fines for each violation and an injunction requiring Arlene’s Flowers to comply with the state’s consumer protection laws, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.



The owner of Arlene’s Flowers in Richland, Wash., was sued by the state’s... (Fox Q13)

The aborted transaction has caused a brouhaha in Washington, which legalized same-sex marriage in November but remains divided over the issue.

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The gay marriage referendum passed largely due to a flood of support in liberal Seattle, while more conservative communities in eastern Washington had deep reservations. In Benton County, where Arlene’s Flowers does business, 63% opposed it.

Since the March 1 incident in the town of Richland, a “Boycott Arlene’s Flowers” Facebook page has shown up, while the shop’s own Facebook page has been flooded with messages of support.

“Stand strong for what is healthy, right and Godly,” said one backer, while a critic wrote that “this is about the law... There is not an ‘I believe in Jesus so the laws don’t apply to me’ exemption.”

Robert Ingersoll and his partner, Curt Freed, had been buying flowers from Arlene’s for nearly a decade when Ingersoll asked Barronelle Stutzman to provide flowers for their upcoming wedding in September, according to the couple’s attorneys.

Stutzman, who declined to comment to the Los Angeles Times on Wednesday, said earlier on her Facebook page that she refused.

“When it came to doing his wedding, I said, ‘I could not do it because of my relationship with Jesus Christ.’ He thanked me and said he respected my opinion. We talked and gave each other a hug and he left,” she wrote.

Stutzman said she believes “biblically” that marriage is between a man and a woman.

“I have hired all walks of people in different circumstances, and had the privilege of working with some very talented people that happen to be gay.”

Ingersoll told the Tri-City Herald the encounter had been deeply troubling. “It really hurt because it was somebody I knew,” he said. “We laid awake all night Saturday. It was eating at our souls. There was never a question she’d be the one to do our flowers. She does amazing work.”

In an announcement of the lawsuit Tuesday, Attorney General Bob Ferguson said he had sent a letter to Stutzman before filing the suit asking her to reconsider, but she refused through her attorney.

"As Attorney General, it is my job to enforce the laws of the state of Washington," Ferguson said. "If a business provides a product or service to opposite-sex couples for their wedding, then it must provide same-sex couples the same product or service."

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On Wednesday, the American Civil Liberties Union also stepped into the fray, sending Stutzman a letter announcing it would file a separate civil suit for damages on behalf of the engaged couple unless she agrees to provide flowers without discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation, publish a letter of apology in the newspaper and donate \$5,000 to a local youth center, in lieu of attorneys' fees.

"Your refusal to sell flowers to Mr. Ingersoll and Mr. Freed for their wedding has hurt them very deeply. It is a disturbing reminder of the history of discrimination and disparate treatment that they and other gay men and women have experienced over the years," ACLU attorney Michael R. Scott said in the letter.

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