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## American Civil Liberties Union Of Arkansas Recognizes Work Of Activist For Gay And Lesbian Youth, Carolyn Wagner

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**LITTLE ROCK, AR** – Ever the warrior, Carolyn Wagner died Tuesday, Jan. 18, after a long battle with cancer, hepatitis and liver failure.

“I was deeply saddened to learn of the death of my friend and Arkansas activist yesterday,” said American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Arkansas Executive Director Rita Sklar.

Wagner and her husband Bill were the parents of a gay son who was brutally tormented by other students while attending school in Northwest Arkansas in 1996.

Soon after an incident that left their son with lasting injuries, the couple filed a complaint with the United States Office for Civil Rights (OCR) against the Fayetteville School District under TITLE IX, which prohibits sexual harassment and discrimination.

It was the first case in which Title IX was used to address the bullying of gay and lesbian students.

“It created a powerful tool, for ending this unspeakable treatment of students who are either gay or lesbian, or who simply are *perceived as* gay or lesbian. It affords these youth the protection of federal law. As we’ve seen in the news lately, such harassment (and physical abuse) is still prevalent in the nation’s schools,” Sklar said. Because of this case, Wagner and Sklar became friends.

The ACLU of Arkansas so admired Wagner’s courage and tenacity that a few years ago, they named Wagner “Civil Libertarian of the Year.”

A few years ago, Wagner asked ACLU Attorney Holly Dickson to make public, “only after her death,” a terrible incident she endured because of her work for gays and lesbians. Dickson said, “Wagner herself was a victim of brutality borne of hate. In 2006, she was assaulted by a person posing as a police officer and beaten by the individual, who told her they didn’t take to “queer loving ACLU types.” Undaunted, Wagner carried on with her support of victims.

Later, Bill Wagner was a plaintiff in a successful case that challenged the Department of Human Services rule prohibiting foster children from staying in a home where adult gay men and lesbians reside, Dickson said. Bill Wagner qualified as a plaintiff because his son, by then an adult, sometimes lived with couple and would have disqualified the couple from fostering children.

As a result of getting involved in the lawsuit and learning about the abuse of many teens by their parents Wagner took in scores of mistreated kids over the years, some of whom were straight, many of whom were gay or perceived as gay by the parents.

“She became so well known for her compassion and generosity—she took in kids both through the state and simply on her own, with no compensation—that there weren’t many days she and Bill weren’t sheltering some poor child,” Sklar said. “She told me about one girl who had permanent scars where a chain was whipped

across her back. Carolyn had a huge heart,” Sklar said.”

Wagner also co-founded Families United Against Hate to serve as a support for victims and families of victims of hate crime, where Wagner served as a liaison between victims and law enforcement, ensuring that others would not fall victim to official complacency such as she and her son experienced.

“Across the country, gay and lesbian rights activists and advocates and anyone who benefited from her tireless work—really, anyone who knew her--is grieving the loss of a great civil rights champion and a kind and loving woman,” said Sklar, “Carolyn will be missed.”

Rita Sklar

ACLU of Arkansas Executive Director