

# Behind the Headlines

## Getting hitched in Buenos Aires

Members of Argentina's foremost gay rights group discuss how they made Buenos Aires the first South American city to recognize civil unions

**O**n December 13, in the midst of a massive social justice movement, Buenos Aires became the first city in Latin America to declare civil union rights for gay and lesbian couples. The 18-year-old activist group *Comunidad Homosexual Argentina* led the campaign to allow both gay and straight couples who have been together for at least two years to get the same health insurance, hospital visitation rights, and pension benefits that married couples get. The law recognizes the civil union of gay couples but does not term the union a marriage. The Advocate met up with *CHA* president César Cigliutti, secretary Marcelo Sunthein, and legal adviser Pedro Paradiso in the group's communal loft in Buenos Aires, with coffee, croissants, and cigarettes served for breakfast.

—Austin Bunn

### How did you decide to fight for civil unions?

*Cigliutti:* The cruelty of the police, here in Buenos Aires and in the whole country, is stunning, particularly with respect to transvestites. Last year, within Buenos Aires, the police detained more than 30 transvestites a night. So we had been trying to develop a legislative strategy about how to fight this. Two years ago we were at this well-known *confitería* [a type of café] called El



Members of the CHA—including Paradiso (far left), Cigliutti (third from left), and Sunthein (center)—gather outside the legislative building.

Olmo, [and] we decided it was time to push forward the idea of civil unions in Buenos Aires.

### It couldn't have been easy.

*Cigliutti:* When we presented the project to the city's commission on human rights—the first official step—we contacted the media so that they would be there. We didn't know at the time, [but] the commission didn't want to consider the project at all. But with all the media around, they had to. Still, a year and a half passed [before there was an official vote] because they put up absolutely every bureaucratic obstacle you can imagine.

*Sunthein:* We used maximum pressure. We did *escraches* [noisy direct action protests]. The legislators got so scared that they had one of the longest

sessions in recent history—almost 18 hours, uninterrupted, from 1 P.M. until 6:30 A.M. the next day.

When they finally came out to talk to the press, they said that this was the most profoundly debated issue they had had in the past two years.

### The law is drafted to help both gay and straight couples—why was that important?

*Sunthein:* Because to create a civil union law just for gays, lesbians, and transsexuals is to create a “blacklist”—a register of homosexuals. Given the history of Argentina under dictatorship of the 1970s, that's very dangerous.

### CHA worked for civil unions without the help of other human rights organizations. Why?

*Sunthein:* Even though the gay community in Ar-

gentina is one of the biggest in Latin America, it's one of the least recognized. We tracked down the biggest financiers to help us, but we were told that there isn't money to support “this kind of activism.” If there's not money to support “this kind of activism,” what kind of activism *does* deserve it?

*Paradiso:* There are hundreds of organizations in Latin America, but we are all facing the same problem, which is this: South America is not first in the eyes of [international human rights organizations] that supports this work. It's last. The money for the campaign was all ours, what we earned from our work. And right now only half of us are employed.

### Argentina is in the middle of an economic and social crisis. Were you ever told by politicians or the public, “Not now”?

*Paradiso:* Yes. But at the same time, the year of protests has really brought out in Argentina the idea of social justice. The middle class, with their savings vanishing in the banks, understood how the state can meddle in your private life in a way that gay people have been living with for years.

### The law has just taken effect. Has anybody taken advantage of it?

*Cigliutti:* He has [smiling, pointing at Sunthein].  
*Sunthein:* So has he [smiling, pointing at Cigliutti].  
*Paradiso:* They're a couple.