

Andrew Chirls Is the New Head of the Philly Bar Association

Not that there's anything wrong with that

Andrew Chirls never wanted to be known as a gay lawyer. He sees himself as a lawyer who just happens to be gay. But like it or not, as the newly installed chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, he is one of the most visible leaders of the gay community. And he isn't shirking the responsibility.

"Hey, look, it's going to be an interesting time to serve," he says, "what with these issues of gay marriage and equality that have risen to the front line."

The 49-year-old partner at Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen was appointed to the position in January. It was a groundbreaking event for the gay community. "Not only was it a first for the Philadelphia Bar, it was a first for any bar association in America," he says, emphasizing that he is the first *openly* gay man elected bar association leader.

Chirls realizes that during his one-year term he will be regarded primarily as "the gay lawyer." But he refuses to let this define his priorities. He has a number of goals on his agenda — among them, improving access to the courts for immigrants, strengthening the bar's international outlook and obtaining more resources for the legal system.

"To be truly effective, I have to focus on all of the issues," he explains. "The Philadelphia Bar Association has 13,000 members, and if I put gay rights at the top of the agenda, then I'd be doing a big disservice."

So far, the gay rights issue hasn't even surfaced. For a reason. "Most of the problems have already been solved," Chirls says. For instance, in its unanimous decision earlier this year, the

Pennsylvania Supreme Court upheld Philadelphia's extension of spousal benefits to gay and lesbian city employees with registered domestic partnerships. The decision reversed a state appeals court's finding that the city went beyond its authority in creating a new marital status.

"We're way ahead of a lot of other places on gay rights issues," Chirls says. "The city ordinances and the bar association's personnel policies are what they should be, and the availability of insurance company coverage for domestic partners has been around for employees of legal organizations for 12 years."

Some of these benefits can be directly traced to Chirls' activities and efforts. In 1989, he became the first openly gay member of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, an agency that adjudicates discrimination claims and arbitrates racial disputes. In 1997, he helped establish the Philadelphia Bar Association's Committee on the Legal Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men. Chirls also played a large part in getting Philadelphia's 25 largest law firms to endorse a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual minorities.

Chirls does not consider himself all that confrontational. Friends and acquaintances describe him as affable, soft-spoken, enthusiastic and approachable — easily drawn in to a conversation about music, baseball, books, bird-watching or world travel. "I am

BY DAN HARVEY

PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY MARCUS

