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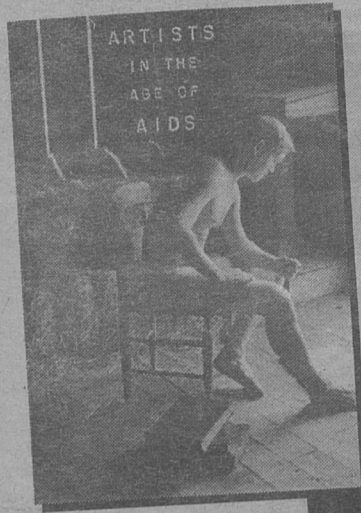
OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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Outright Vermont Prepares for New Executive Director

BY CHUCK FRANKLIN

The board of Outright Vermont fired executive director Keith Elston in early December, about one week following the withdrawal of \$12,000 in state funding support for Outright's in-school presentation program.

On January 17, it announced the appointment of board member B.J. Rogers as the new executive director.

David Ryan, board chair, said Elston's dismissal was based on a number of factors, and that the board unanimously felt they wanted a change in leadership.

However, he pointed specifically to a late-night phone call Elston made to department of education commissioner David Wolk shortly after the state's decision was made. While Ryan would not elaborate, Elston said he did phone Wolk about two days after the decision to express his frustrations.

"I had read on on-line Rutland Herald article which had some quotes [in it] made by Wolk, saying that Outright Vermont was no longer doing the presentations because they were no longer effective," said Elston. Becoming angry about the quotes, Elston decided to call Wolk about 10 p.m. at his home.

Later acknowledging the call was made at an inappropriate time and manner, Elston said he apologized both in writing and by phone to Wolk. Both agreed to put the matter behind them, said Elston.

A spokesperson for Wolk, Diane Derby, denied that Wolk ever characterized Outright Vermont in such a manner or that he or anyone else at the department ever called Outright Vermont's board to complain about the late-night phone call. Derby said Elston's dismissal was between him and Outright's

board, and in no way was the department a party to the board's decision.

Only a few days later, however, Elston said Outright's board asked him to resign. He said he refused because he wanted to let people know he was not abandoning Outright Vermont during a significant crisis. The board went on to fire him the same day.

Elston claims his ouster came as a complete surprise, and he had had no indications the board was unsatisfied with him. However, he said he had had private discussions about resigning in six to eight months to move away from the non-profit sector.

The relationship between Elston and Outright's board was, however, not without tension. "Besides the \$12,000 [loss], there were philosophical differences between me and the board," Elston said. "I had expressed things [to them] like expanding Outright Vermont into rural areas, opposing cuts in staff or benefits, and concerns about the board's moving the organization forward."

Elston does admit he had become tired out by the relentless and unfair criticisms directed at Outright Vermont over the last several months. He said people were constantly claiming the organization was molesting children and distributing pornography, that staff lives were threatened by people coming into their offices, and that irate parents and state legislators would not accept Outright's answers to their claims no matter what they would say.

Prior to coming to Vermont, Elston served as the executive director of ACLU in New Mexico. He said he still loves Vermont, and that he and his partner Mark plan to stay. As for the future, Elston said he plans to take some time off, recuperate

from the nine long months of attacks from the religious right, and then look for work here.

Outright's new executive director took over in early February. Rogers had served for nine months on the Outright board and had been an admission counselor and transfer coordinator at Saint Michael's College.

Rogers said he, like everyone at Outright, was greatly disappointed over the loss of the state funding. "The commissioner [Wolk] has assured us that his reasoning for withdrawing the funding was to put that money into the state's own safe schools programming," he said.

"This change by no means excludes Outright from continuing to work with schools throughout the state as we've done for more than a decade now," he explained.

Sue Wilson, Outright's Educational Development Coordinator, also said that the organization intends to con-

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Civil Union Group Changes Focus

Formerly the Vermont Freedom to Marry Action Committee, the lobbying entity that took the lead in the Baker v. Sate decision last year, has changed its name to Vermonters for Civil Unions Legislative Defense Fund.

This time with its mission being to protect the integrity of the civil union law, the VCULDF is gearing up for another legislative session. Now that the House and Senate committees are formed, and the session is underway, they have a better sense of where things are going this time around.

Currently, the Civil Union issue looks like it will not be revisited, considering that the Senate Judiciary Committee is the same as last year. There is one exception though, which may or may not have any impact: Senator Campbell has replaced Senator McCormack. Current Committee members are Senators Sears, Cummings, Illuzzi, Bloomer, Leddy and Campbell. Four of the six Committee members support Civil Unions. As of now, it doesn't look like the Senate Judiciary Committee has any plans to revisit the Civil Union issue. A closely divided anti-

civil union House Judiciary Committee plans to evaluate the law, although the civil union law won't be its sole focus.

House Judiciary Committee Chair Peg Flory, a Republican from Pittsford, has indicated that she will try to limit consideration of the civil union law to one day each week — Tuesdays.

The possibility of repeal remains; the committee will also likely explore ways to weaken and undermine the law without repealing it outright. The House Judiciary Committee has six members on record opposed to Civil Unions (Reps Flory, Gervais, Haas, Kennedy, Kilmartin, and Otterman) and five members on record in support (Reps Vinton, Kainen, Grad, Lippert, Nuovo). That committee does plan to reexamine the law and will be holding committee hearings mostly on Tuesdays throughout the session. VCULDF officer Susan Murray notes, "It's important to remember that if the legislature had voted on the civil union bill in the first week of last year, it probably wouldn't have passed. When legislators have the opportunity to listen

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