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Revisiting History

BY ELIZABETH HANE

I'm new to Vermont and *Out in the Mountains*. As a way of introducing myself to the history of the area and to the LBGT community, I volunteered to take on a project of transcribing the back issues of *Out in the Mountains* so that they could be placed on the web as an on-line resource. It's not a difficult job; mostly I fix things that the text-recognition software doesn't understand, such as turning all the *hornosexuals* back into *homosexuals*. In the process, however, I read all the articles, and although I've only finished the first year and a half of the magazine, I have already learned a tremendous amount about the recent history of the gay rights movement in Vermont.

I started the transcriptions in late October at the height of the election fervor surrounding the Civil Unions Act. Every day on my drive to work, I felt like I was running the gauntlet through the Take Back Vermont signs. Imagine my surprise when I opened up Volume 1, Number 3 (April, 1986) and found the following sentence: "It is important to call a bigot a bigot, to point out that their campaign of hate is

contrary to the best traditions of Vermont." This could have just as easily been written in the fall of 2000 even though the writer was referring to the political unrest surrounding the then upcoming vote on the Equal Rights Amendment that would have provided equal protection for women in Vermont.

The same issue included the comment: "Gay rights is an issue whose time has not yet come in Vermont, but is rapidly approaching." In February of that year, a bill was introduced in the legislature that extended anti-discrimination protections in rental properties to include sexual orientation. Legislators later dropped "sexual orientation" from the bill to avoid certain defeat. Defeat? I was dumbfounded when I read that. This was only 15 years ago. Vermont now leads the nation in protections and rights for gays and lesbians. How was it possible that just 15 years ago there were no rights or protections for gay and lesbian Vermonters?

So, I am continuing to read through the issues to find out what happened in those intervening 15 years. I do know that the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated in Vermont in November 1986. It was perceived as a blow, not only to women's rights, but to gay and lesbian rights as well. Opponents of the ERA used

misinformation to spread the idea that voting for the ERA was voting for gay marriage. They used people's fear and homophobia to defeat the amendment. It was a long and angry fight. Many people were concerned about the rift that it opened in the state and that the healing process might take many years. Sound familiar?

The archiving project has its lighter moments, Otoo. In the 1986 Thanksgiving issue, one of the things on the list to be thankful for was the tongue-in-cheek reference to the "two weekends of sunshine in the summer of 1986." I thought, "You should be thankful for those, because in 2000, we had none."

I hope that reading later issues will provide some insight as to how people in states such as Maine have had their equal rights bill defeated twice now and can pick up the pieces after those defeats and keep trying. If Vermont can move from having no protections for sexual orientation to its present status in 15 years, I have tremendous hope that similar progress can be possible in other states. I write this article from my parents' home in Oklahoma as I'm visiting for the holidays. Many local gays and lesbians from my parents' PFLAG group have asked me if life is really better in Vermont for LBGT people. I have to say that compared to Oklahoma, which has no anti-discrimination laws for sexual orientation, it really is. But when I tell them how far Vermont has come in 15 years, they are hopeful and determined that things can change there, too.

Because of this archiving project, I feel I have a better appreciation of how far we have come and how far we have to go. I hesitate a bit to say "we" since I've only just arrived here — New Englanders have a long tradition of being slow to accept newcomers as part of the community. (How long will I be a newcomer here?) I also hesitate to embrace all the rights and protections that have come from the sweat of other people's brows. So to all the people who have written letters, made phone calls, organized parades, planned meetings, attended rallies, filed lawsuits and stood up for yourselves and thousands of silent others, I thank you. I look forward to joining you.

Elizabeth lives in Richmond. She works as a forest ecologist at UVM.

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