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MOUNTAIN PRIDE'S VOICE FOR THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

# OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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## LAWMAKER TARGETS VERMONT SCHOOLS

Although Sheltra failed in her attempts to derail civil unions and impeach the Supreme Court, she has not given up her fight against what she labels the "gay agenda" in the state.



Photo courtesy of Vermont Secretary of State

BY PAUL OLSEN

MONTPELIER – Vermont teachers may be greeted by more than just students when school reconvenes this year. Once school begins, parents may present school officials with a student "opt-out" form requiring parental notification if the school plans to discuss "homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism, transvestitism, transsexuality, sado-masochism, pedophilia, bestiality or other alternatives to monogamous heterosexual sex within marriage ...that would convey the message ...that such orientations/behaviors are immutable, unchangeable, natural, normal, or harmless."

The introduction of the new student opt-out form in Vermont is the brainchild of conservative state Rep. Nancy Sheltra (R-Derby), a long time opponent of gay rights who created a political action committee, dubbed STARS or Standing Together and Reclaiming the State, to

defeat the state's landmark civil union law and impeach the members of Vermont's Supreme Court.

Although Sheltra failed in her attempts to derail civil unions and impeach the Supreme Court, she has not given up her fight against what she labels the "gay agenda" in the state. "The need for the opt-out form comes from the fact that Outright Vermont has been allowed to go into the school system," she said.

"Many parents don't know this information is being presented in the classroom," Sheltra added. "One first grader in the state brought home (the book) *Heather Has Two Mommies* and her mother then decided to home school her child. We feel the student opt-out form is necessary. What we're going to do now is start organizing throughout the state."

The form requires schools to give parents or legal guardians at least five days notice before

human sexuality is discussed in the classroom or at school activities. The form applies to any "legitimization or normalization" of homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism, transvestitism, transsexuality, sado-masochism, pedophilia, or bestiality through AIDS education, diversity, gender studies, safe schools or multicultural programs. Under the form, parents are also permitted to review school course materials and lesson plans.

B.J. Rogers, Executive Director of Outright Vermont, a gay youth support group, rejects Sheltra's call for parental adoption of the opt-out form.

"Nancy Sheltra's introduction of the form is based on her opinion that what happens in sex education classes is a movement of the 'homosexual agenda' to recruit or introduce young people to the 'homosexual lifestyle,'" he said. "The form is really just an opportunity for her to spread more lies about what happens in sex education classes and about the kind of work that Outright does."

The Vermont Department of Education has no official position on Sheltra's opt-out form and says that local school boards should decide how to respond to it. "Curriculum decisions are made on a local

level," said Diane Derby, spokesperson for the department. "If schools want to take a look at Ms. Sheltra's form we don't hold a position on it. Schools have routinely responded to the concerns of individual parents and we have faith that they will continue to do so. Contrary to what Ms. Sheltra has suggested we don't believe there is any promotion of a homosexual agenda in schools."

The mission of Sheltra's STARS political action committee is to "engage in all aspects of the political process in defense of our moral Christian heritage which was the foundation of our country and state".

## VERMONT CIVIL UNION REVIEW COMMISSION CONTINUES TO STUDY LANDMARK LAW

BY PAUL OLSEN

MONTPELIER – The group charged with monitoring the implementation and operation of Vermont's civil union law continues to meet and study the landmark law. Most recently, members of the Vermont Civil Union Review Commission heard testimony from Mary Bonauto, an attorney from the Boston-based Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD).

In her phone testimony to the Vermont Civil Union Review Commission, Bonauto, who also served as co-counsel in the Baker v. Vermont gay marriage lawsuit, discussed the nationwide fallout from Vermont's move to provide marriage-related rights and benefits to gay and lesbian couples through legally recognized civil unions.

"I wanted to share my impression which is that overall the experience that people have had has been very positive not only in terms of being personally meaningful for them," Bonauto said.

Joining in civil unions hasn't caused people problems," she said. "It has been a very positive thing for people that has had some tangible results. I'm aware of situations in which a person has been able to change their name on a driver's license simply by showing their civil

with a number of situations in which people have gained access to employee benefits, particularly health insurance, because they have joined in civil union."

In addition to commenting on the effectiveness of the year-old law, Bonauto discussed legal activity related to Vermont's civil union law in five states – Rhode Island, Connecticut, Hawaii, Washington and California.

According to openly gay state Rep. Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg), a member of the commission, Bonauto's testimony was helpful. "Mary (Bonauto) summarized the impact (of civil unions) outside of Vermont," he said.

"There have been five other states where civil union or civil union like legislation has been introduced," Lippert said. "There's not a rash of lawsuits. The only pending litigation is a case in Georgia where a woman who was divorced and part of her (child) custody proceeding said that she could only have visitation with her children if she was by herself or with someone with whom she was married. She had come to Vermont with her lesbian partner and had a civil union and is now challenging it in the Georgia courts saying it should be recognized as the equivalent or marriage under Georgia law for her custody

Since Vermont's civil union law took effect in July 2000, 2,479 civil union licenses have been issued. Nearly 20% or 487 civil unions have been for Vermont couples. The remaining 80% are from other states and countries including Canada, Mexico, Germany, and India.

Established with passage of Vermont's civil union law, the Civil Union Review Commission is an eleven-member group charged with collecting "information about the implementation, operation and effect of the act...(and) recognition and treatment of Vermont civil unions by other states and jurisdictions, including procedures for dissolution."

The Commission's first report, issued last January, stated that Vermont's civil union law is working as intended. Concluding that the civil union law is consistent with providing "eligible same-sex couples the opportunity to obtain the same benefits and protections afforded by Vermont law to married opposite-sex couples," the group made "no recommendation at this time for further state action."

By law, the commission is required to issue a second report by January 15, 2002. The group is scheduled to meet again in September and October to continue studying the law.

### inside

Arts.....	22
Calendar.....	27
Classifieds.....	33
Columns.....	17
Community Compass.....	26
Features.....	13
The Source.....	29
Views.....	11