

OITM Celebrates Fifth Birthday

A Look Back at the Paper's History

by Miki Thomas

I remember back in the fall of 1985 when the idea of a gay and lesbian newspaper for Vermont started to gain momentum. As Philip Roberts wrote in an article celebrating the second anniversary of *Out in the Mountains* in February 1988, the now defunct Vermonters for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VLGR) felt that "a vehicle was needed to help the lesbian/gay community develop a method of sharing what was happening in our political, social, and personal lives."

Late November of that year, a meeting was held at the Peace and Justice Center in

Burlington to start up such a paper. Representatives from VLGR and interested community members such as myself attended the meeting. We discussed the contents of the paper and the name of it (*Out in the Mountains* was chosen based on past gay pride logos of New Hampshire and Vermont). To finance the enterprise, we applied for a grant from the Haymarket People's Fund of Boston for start-up money.

The grant from the Haymarket People's Fund came through for \$2,000 to get the paper going. Several meetings were later held, and the next February, the first issue of *Out in the Mountains* appeared.

Carrie Coy joined OITM after moving to Burlington in February of 1986. She

remembers that it was exciting for her to work on the paper. A small handful of people would meet at the beginning of each month to plan the next month's issue and then would meet later to read over and edit whatever stories and press releases came into the office, which at that time was rented from the Peace and Justice Center. As OITM was not yet computerized, all of the layout was done by hand.

Once the paper was printed up, the collective members would then collate it and get it ready to mail to subscribers and distribute around town. There were only fifty to sixty subscribers at that point, with the emphasis being on free distribution around the Burlington area. The only other

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areas to receive OITM were Montpelier, where a man distributed 200 copies, and Brattleboro, where copies were sent off to Colors, one of the town's gay bars.

Over the next four years, OITM began to gain power as the mouthpiece of Vermont's gay and lesbian communities. A case in point is the political polling often done. When VLGR would poll candidates before the November elections regarding their stands on issues of interest to the gay and lesbian communities, it received little response. However, when OITM conducted a similar poll in 1986, almost all of the candidates responded when it was made clear that the results would be published.

OITM covered major stories as well. The first issue of OITM covered legislation that would ban discrimination against those who are HIV+. Since then, OITM has covered the Pride parades, the 1986 ERA campaign, the Gay Rights Bill hearings of 1987 and 1988, and the 1987 March on Washington.

Membership, however, did not grow during that period. A handful of people were still doing the jobs of writing, typing, laying out, and distributing the paper. By 1989, key people had left and new ones hadn't come in. The collective had dwindled to four people. One member was going to leave the area the following sum-

mer, and the other three had all reached the burnout point. This would have been the end of OITM unless, as Carrie Coy put it, "we could scare up people to help out."

An insert was put into the January 1990 issue with the ominous declaration that "This is OITM's last issue." The insert had one ray of hope - it also said that a meeting would be held the next month to discuss whether OITM should be kept alive or be allowed to die a dignified death.

On February 17, 1990, over forty people from all over Vermont met at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington. Local media showed up as well, and the meeting was covered on WCAX News that night and the *Burlington Free Press* the following morning. The consensus was that OITM needed to be kept alive, for OITM served a vital role in the lives of gay and lesbian Vermonters and their friends.

For Carrie Coy, however, even this positive reaction left her a bit skeptical: "I wasn't sure if the group was willing to put the work into it." But now, she says, "It's wonderful to see the paper thrive."

Since that February meeting, a group of fifteen or so individuals has met regularly to put the paper out on a monthly basis and to live up to the purpose as it was stated in the very first issue five years ago and as it continues to be stated today.

On and On, Better and Better Thoughts from a former editor

Hugh Coyle

RIPTON -- *Out In The Mountains* has come a long way since its inception a decade ago. Looking back on that relatively short history, I am amazed by how much gay, lesbian, and bisexual Vermonters have accomplished in that time. Our newspaper has reflected that success and growth, developing from a sometimes "catch as catch can" underground flyer into a substantial publication whose readership continues to expand.

My own history with the newspaper began in February 1990, when OITM was in serious danger of disappearing entirely. A special public meeting was convened to

address the situation; in many ways, that meeting was my first introduction to a g/l/b community that I have come to love and respect even more with each passing year.

At the time, four staff members at Middlebury College (including myself) had just come together to create a group that would eventually bear the name GLEAM (Gay and Lesbian Employees At Middlebury). That group owes its existence to OITM; an article of mine reviewing gay and lesbian books served as the catalyst for the four of us finding one another. Shortly after its publication, I

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received a note via campus mail expressing surprise and joy at the article, along with a brave confession: "I've read those books too!"

Within weeks we were gathered together officially for the first time, and OITM's pending demise was high on our list of topics to discuss. (Actually, it was the only topic we had to discuss, other than how good the brownies were that our hostess served. Just what had we hoped to accomplish by meeting like that anyway?) We ventured off to Burlington together, at that time content just to listen and marvel at the strength and commitment displayed by those who had previously been associated with the newspaper.

A follow-up meeting was scheduled, and that's when it happened. Somehow, for reasons I cannot fully recall or explain, my right hand went up in the air when the facilitators asked if anyone was interested in becoming the new editor. Several other people offered to help out, and a month or so later, the "Phoenix" issue of the paper rose from the ashes. Though that issue was only four pages long and somewhat rough in its conception, the crisis had been averted, and OITM lived to see its fifth year.

One cannot say enough good things about the group of people that came together in those years with the common mission of saving the paper. I recall long meetings and sometimes heated discussions about form and content. Likewise, I remember the follow-up socializing over pizza at Zachary's or ice cream at Ben and Jerry's. Soon, we were stuffing newspapers once a month on a Saturday morning, then heading off to stuff ourselves with lunch somewhere in Burlington, then returning to have two or three hour business meetings in the afternoon.

The men and women volunteering to work on the paper with me quickly became more than just acquaintances or colleagues, more even than simply friends. We had become a family. Together we wrestled with organizational by-laws and articles of incorporation, puzzled over postal rates and processes, and moved to include bisexuals in the masthead (ever a controversy, but with two bisexuals, myself included, putting in a great deal of time and effort, we felt it entirely justified).

While covering stories like the brutal beating of a gay man outside of Pearls, we supported one another and mustered the courage to cry in sympathy in the morning, then speak up loudly at hearings on the Hate Crimes Bill (then in legislation) in the evening. As journalists, we were all hyper-sensitive to the state of gay affairs in the state. That translated into moments of extreme frustration and disappointment as well as times of great delight and happiness. The latter have lasted the longest for me.

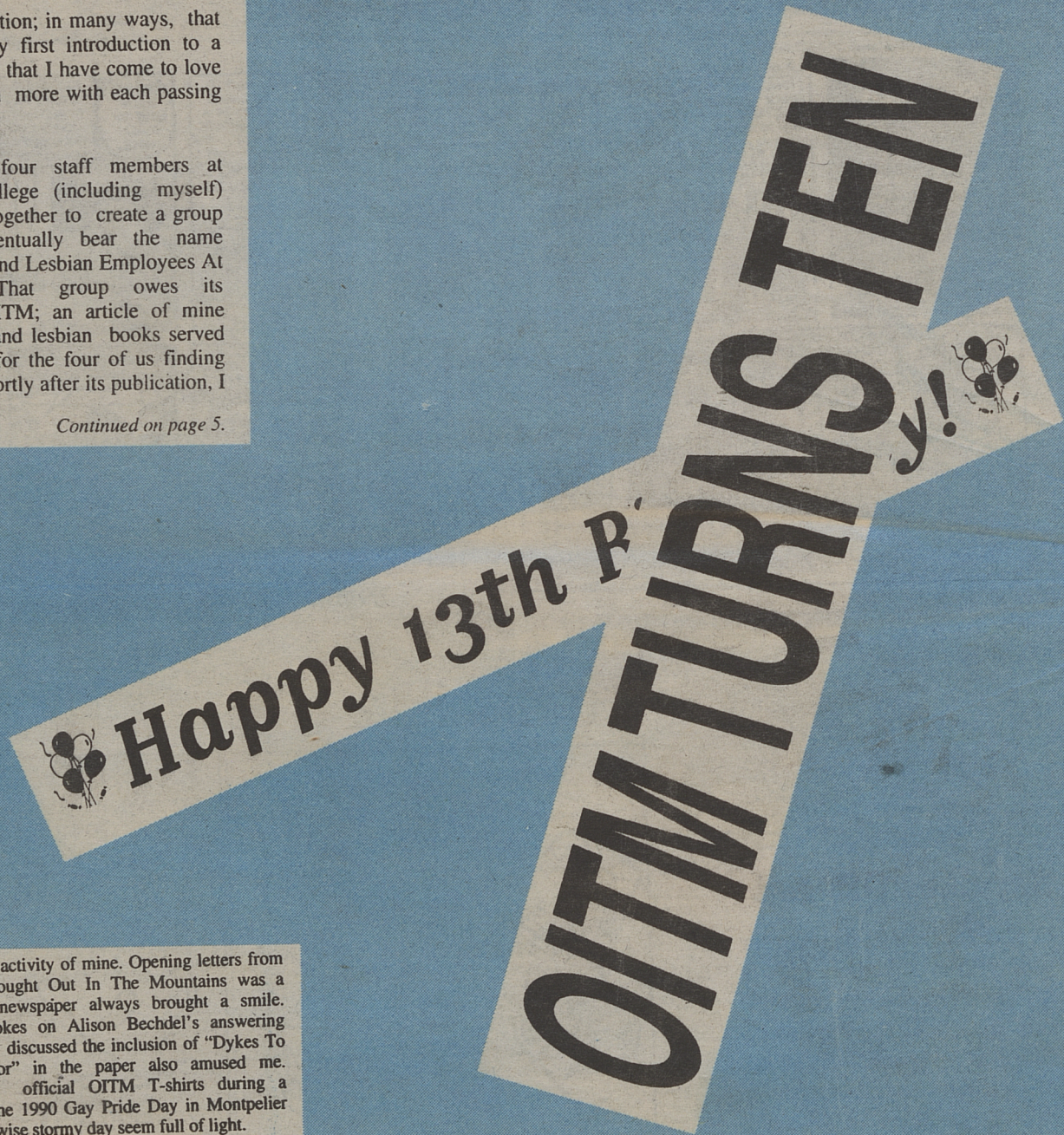
Receiving explicit "safe sex" articles on the fax machine in my daytime office (and having the secretary read them before delivering them to me) always left me wondering about this new

extracurricular activity of mine. Opening letters from people who thought *Out In The Mountains* was a backpacking newspaper always brought a smile. Listening to jokes on Alison Bechdel's answering machine as we discussed the inclusion of "Dykes To Watch Out For" in the paper also amused me. Unveiling our official OITM T-shirts during a cloudburst at the 1990 Gay Pride Day in Montpelier made an otherwise stormy day seem full of light.

Most of all, though, I remember the people who volunteered long hours (and plenty of muscle moving boxes of papers up and down stairs). To think that such a staff of unpaid and often dissimilar individuals could come together to create something so meaningful each month. It was truly the first time I ever felt optimistic about the power of community.

When we gathered on the steps outside our 30 Elmwood Avenue offices in Burlington (rented to us by Vermont CARES at the time) for a holiday greeting photo, I felt an incredible upswell of joy and pride. That photo, which appeared in the December 1990 issue, means a great deal to me as I consider the newspaper's history. For the first time, we were willing to include our own photos in the paper. At the time, it seemed like such an incredible risk given the events of the previous year. Today, I am excited to see so many more faces appearing in the paper with each issue, smiling faces, proud faces, beautiful faces.

One gesture stands alone as the most significant moment of my tenure as editor. For the "Coming Out" issue of the paper in October of 1990, we as an editorial board also "came out" and, for the first time in the newspaper's history, printed our names in the masthead for all to see. Bylines began to appear more and more regularly, and those writers who had once resorted to pseudonyms began requesting that their real names be used. Subscribers even wrote in requesting that we stop hiding the paper in manilla mailing envelopes.



Even then, you could feel something momentous happening in the state, and that impetus continues to this day. We had rescued the paper from a critical time, built it up into a much larger, more inclusive, and more comprehensive publication, and we were proud to stand behind our accomplishment. Likewise, we were proud to report on the accomplishments of all those who were featured in our pages. As gay people, we were still learning how to stand up and be counted in our state. That lesson, taught to me during my editorship, has changed my life for the better, and I thank the paper for having provided me with the opportunity.

Looking at the paper today, I remain amazed at how much we continue to accomplish in this state, and at the high level of grace and dignity with which we achieve our goals. Vermont continues to be a place like no other in the country, with its natural beauty and commitment to values enhanced by the strength of its gay, lesbian, and bisexual residents. Therefore, we demand and continue to produce a quality publication that reflects the joys and sorrows of our community.

May OITM live on for another decade, and another beyond that ... and on and on through the entire 21st century ... and may the news get better and better with every glorious issue. ♥