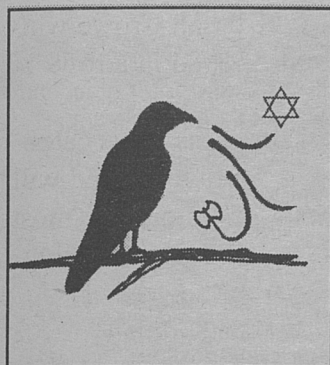


# Crow's Caws: Strong at the Hurting Places



## crow cohen

The older I get, the less comfortable I am at big parties to tell you the truth. I like focused, intense conversations that are hard to pull off at large gatherings; but at the Mountain Pride Media celebration for volunteers I met someone who riveted my attention – Roland Palmer's mother, Chicky. She was helping out in the kitchen, and I wanted to find out more about the generous-spirited, middle-aged woman who was bustling around like mad trying to feed the masses. I could tell by the way Roland would stop and rub her shoulders or exchange a few loving words that they had a close, trusting relationship. I also wondered what it was like for her to be around all her son's queer friends. When I struck up a conversation I was so impressed with her openness and honesty, that a few days later I asked if I could interview her for the paper.

Chicky (Laurel) Boutin can certainly claim native Vermonter status. Born in 1944, the fifth-oldest child of 13 brothers and sisters, she grew up on a farm in Williston doing chores at an early age and learning "how to fix things." (I'm jealous.) She can trace her French-Canadian heritage back to 1665. Her father was a logger from Canada; her mother a seamstress at the Woolen Mill in Winooski and a cook at Fanny Allen Hospital. Her grandmother, a midwife, delivered several of her siblings (Chicky was the first to be born in a hospital) and was a full-blooded Iroquois.

The family believed in living off the land, and her parents trusted the kids to run the farm. They cut down their own trees for firewood, gathered cat-tails and cowslips in the spring for food and avoided eating the animals they raised because they needed them to generate income. Chicky sometimes felt like an outcast as a French-Canadian Catholic in a predominately Anglo town, but their large family hosted many a house party for French Canadians from the surrounding area to celebrate their culture with fiddlers and folk tunes. She describes her family as close, devoted and resourceful. They rarely went to doctors. Her father chopped off the tip of his

finger with an ax, and they cured it by using her grandmother's salve. Chicky was the mediator in the family, the peacemaker – a role she said she passed down to Roland.

A few times in Chicky's past, her legs would suddenly go out from under her or she would pass out for no apparent reason. Her family attributed it to exhaustion, but at the age of 42 she suffered a complete collapse. The doctors thought she'd had a massive heart attack, but then they diagnosed her with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and found old

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lesions on her brain that she must have incurred when she was a youngster. She found out that Vermont has the highest incidence of MS per capita in the U.S. and Europe! From ages 42 to 49 she passed through an intensely painful cycle in her disease. Fortunately she had three helpful children, a supportive husband, incredible friends as well as an understanding boss at IBM who let her continue to work at whatever level she could manage.

She suffered from horrendous sharp pains in her head, loss of eyesight for days on end, and debilitating depressions that made her feel like she was "crawling through a tunnel." At times she simply couldn't move. She didn't know what to do with her body and felt like "throwing it away." She had to be bathed and toileted by her oldest daughter which made her as dependent as a child. She was angry all the time even at the people who were trying to help her. She felt like she lost all her dignity and wanted to kill herself.

Up until then she'd had a "type-A personality" – competitive, perfectionist, controlling. She was "forced to go inward," compelled to balance her Libra scales. She had to learn to let go of having everything done her way, of having everything spic and span. A gift of this disease was that she had to accept help.

"The wind helped me

out, the warmth of the air," the trees and flowers and birds and love of her family. When her kids would bring her outdoors so she could absorb the natural world, she came to believe that "whatever was out there was bigger than all of us, and it was all connected."

One day Chicky's sisters brought her to Springfield, Mass. to witness the healing powers of Fr. Dieorio – a Catholic priest denounced by the Church for practicing "laying on of hands." It was there that she experienced a spiritual awakening that changed her life. Fr. Dieorio told her, "I don't want to touch you to heal you because you can heal yourself, but I want to touch you so I can receive from you the energy to heal thousands of others." Chicky's sisters claim she never left her wheelchair, but Chicky said she walked to the front of the auditorium to receive this message. All told the details don't matter. Both she and her

sisters were transformed. "After that I started getting better."

The MS has been in remission since 1993. Her large brain lesions have shrunk dramatically. The doctors are dumbfounded. They're actually doing research on her because they have never seen anyone return to such a high level of functioning considering that she lost so much ground in the past. Because of her use of alternative medicine she developed a new career as a bodywork therapist. She's a master in Reiki healing and practices reflexology, aromatherapy, myofascia release, and massage therapy in her beautiful log "dream house" at the end of (you guessed it) Palmer Rd. in Hinesburg – a part of a seventy-two acre tract of land where Roland, his brother and other family members have built their own homes.

But the story doesn't end there. I asked Chicky how she coped with her son's coming out process given her traditional Catholic farm family background. Chicky said, "I knew before Roland was born that he would be different." She was endowed at an early age with visionary powers passed down from her heritage. When she was pregnant she saw "two children – male and female." In fact she noticed when Roland was a child he could easily interact with both boys and girls. Like his mediator mother "he was a person who saw both

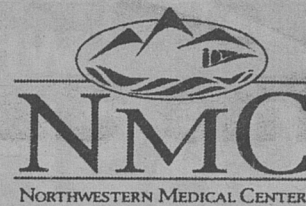
sides" and had the capacity "to bring them together." She never thought of him as gay, but she was careful to nurture the individuality in all her children. Roland, currently the Vice President of Mountain Pride Media, was the oldest and was an "over-achiever," according to Chicky. It must have been hard for him in his small Vermont town as a teenager since he knew when he was in grade school he was "special" (Chicky's word). Roland said these feelings conflicted with his Catholic upbringing, but because he was raised in an "open and honest" household he decided to tell his mother the truth. He couldn't bear to hide his inner being from people he loved and respected.

Roland describes himself as more of a rebel than his mother does. As a teenager he had his ears pierced and bleached his hair, which drove his dad nuts, but he still did well in school and kept up with the chores to prove to his family that he could be different but acceptable. As a matter of fact his father, Ron, was less than pleased when Chicky told him that their son was gay. She talked to her husband for two or three hours, and then Ron stayed up all night talking with Roland which cleared the air. "We told him we loved him, and that's what mattered," she said.

Chicky said she didn't feel she had the right to "out" Roland. She heard a lot of homophobia in the circles she traveled in because both she and her husband were active on town boards. She endured the gossip but kept her mouth shut, allowing her son to express his own views when he was ready. Since then other children in prominent families have come out, which has made it easier. Chicky was glad the civil union law was passed. "It's not right to be punished for who you are," she said. She knew what it was like to be discriminated against for being French Canadian. She loves the work Roland is doing in the GLBT community. He's reaching out to help others, a value she taught him as a child. "It's excellent. He's teaching them dignity." Roland said he's grateful that his Vermont family was able at first to "live and let live" and then to embrace his choice. "My mother is an amazing woman with an amazing faith. I've gained strength through her life-threatening disease."

After hearing her story, all I could think was, "So have I, Chicky, so have I." ▼

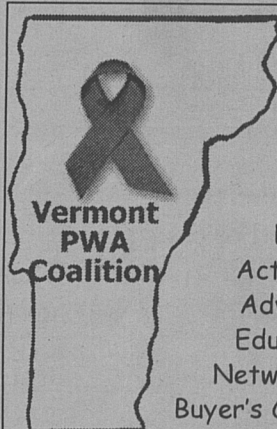
*Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist from Winooski.*



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