

community profile



Pippin, Not Peter Pan

Radical Faery Christopher Kaufman's life in activism has taken him from Vergennes to London and back again.

By EUAN BEAR

Christopher Kaufman always loved *The Hobbit*, to the point that when he started growing hair on his legs and feet, "I was sure that meant I was really going to become a hobbit – a very tall hobbit." He didn't, but he did become a Radical Faery named Pippin (after the hobbit of the same name from Tolkien's famous fantasy books). And he became the "Direct Services Coordinator" (a title he dislikes) for Outright Vermont for the past two years. If you were at the Youth Pride speakout, Christopher was the tall guy in the blue wig ready with a hug for any young speaker who needed it. He is moving on to other things this fall, but before he does, we're sharing his story in the first of what I hope will be many community profiles of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people who live in Vermont. I talked with him on his 33rd birthday, an event that inspired him to take stock of his life.

Christopher Kaufman: Tolkien was always my favorite author from when I was a child. Now I'm 33, the age when hobbits become adults. So now is the time to begin taking better care of myself. I have a particular relationship to Pippin. In the movie [*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*], Pippin is the anarchist hobbit – he never loses sight of his status as someone who is looked down on by the power structure.

Once I went to a "bear" bar [frequented by large hairy gay men] and I was so totally ignored, even though I'm a fairly hairy guy and six feet tall. It just showed me that body fascism exists no matter where you are. I was still alienated even though this was a space that was supposed to be for those who didn't fit the

twinkie model. That's what I like about the Faeries – their acceptance of diversity. They're very multi-generational. There are guys in their 70s and in their 20s and in between. And their willingness to talk about body fascism and other issues.

So now I'm 33 and I've decided to move on from Outright. Part of my 33rd birthday is recognizing a stronger ability to take care of myself, to make my own decisions. I'm keeping my options open, but I hope to do some consulting and counseling with young people. I'm planning to go to Antioch in counseling psychology with a spiritual focus.

Euan Bear: Let's start at the beginning. Where were you born?

CK: I was born in Mary Fletcher Hospital. [sarcastically] I love it how they've taken two ladies [Mary Fletcher and Fanny Allen] and turned them into a man [Fletcher Allen].

My family lived in Vergennes. I spent my whole school career in the Addison Northwest Supervisory Union. I think that was good, but frighteningly insular, particularly when it came to sexual identity issues, which I began dealing with around age 10. There was no support, just active hostility. There were a few teachers, certain teachers who were known to support the "different" kids. But it was limited – that kind of support could put their jobs in jeopardy. We couldn't talk about [sexuality] openly.

When I really first began to know I liked men was in second grade when I became obsessed with [the comic book character] the Green Arrow. I was so completely obsessed that my grades suffered. And that was when I first was into faeries.

I grew up in an abusive family situation. My Dad was basically a control freak who became

really unhappy with Mom's independent choice to go to nursing school and become a nurse and have her own income. Eventually they split up, but watching that process helped set me on the road to social activism.

I took on a caretaker role in my family and elsewhere. I was always trying to fix everything. And then I had to unlearn those behaviors. You can't fix other people. Sometimes you can help them get skills they need to fix themselves, but it's always their job.

I was married for five years to a wonderful human being, and my need to "fix" stuff was one area of challenge for us.

I think activists start out doing that – fixing the world. But really, empowerment and growth are the eventual goals, and that involves support, not "fixing."

I had a hard time coming out because I had such negative experiences with other men. I was sexually abused by a teenager whose family rented the upstairs of our

house. It kept me oppressed about my body, about dealing with emotions, how to tell the difference between abuse and love. I got through a lot of that with support from my former wife. It really sucks when you help each other to consciousness and then it comes back to bite you in the butt.

EB: And abuse sure does make it difficult to sort out about being gay – "Was I abused because I was gay or am I gay because I was sexually abused?"

CK: Queer kids are already isolated emotionally, and that makes them vulnerable to exploitation by preda-

on environmental issues with VPIRG [Vermont Public Interest Research Group]. Working on recycling and opposition to a waste incinerator in Rutland was a fabulous experience in community organizing.

When NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] was happening, I became the first paid coordinator for Burlington's Sister City project [with Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua]. There was a tenth anniversary brigade that went to Nicaragua, and then we brought two musicians from Puerto Cabezas here.

When we went to Nicaragua, we were welcomed as white people with money that would help their economy, but we were also asked, "What about poor people in your community? How are you helping them?" They so clearly saw similarities in oppression, and that helping should not be about being patronizing, about bringing pencils or teddy bears for the daycare. Cultural exchange is good – but structural change is the real struggle.

[Christopher worked on the first major demonstrations against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC, running a national ad campaign.]

It was very homophobic [working on globalization issues]. Your personal struggle was simply not relevant, the personal was not important. There was gender sensitivity, but only within a binary structure, and nothing we did was about personal oppression. There were other queers in the movement and I knew who they were, but nobody talked about it.

I thought I was bisexual – that was safer than being a gay man. I mean, why would I ever want to be in a relationship with a man when they're so hateful and abusive? All of my closest friends and lovers were women. I knew lesbians but no other gay men.

I decided to go to graduate school for a master's in Community Development, focusing on gender.

ple, one boy, one girl, and they were so out they scared the rest of us who were in the closet. I really wanted to be out, but it was a small campus. I came out to two people in college, and then I went right back in the closet, even though they were both supportive.

EB: So after working on globalization issues, you went to graduate school – where?

CK: The London School of Economics. I wanted to look at development from the World Bank's perspective. I couldn't play the game, couldn't change my perspective enough to fit in. I did my master's project on women in Haiti.

During the coup period in Haiti, the male organizers were disappeared – seven thousand of them were killed by the generals. And those spaces were filled by women. I was asking why weren't the women disappeared – how did they organize differently. Women tended to pay more attention to community needs like organizing neighborhoods to sleep in shifts so that everyone had a place under a roof to sleep for a portion of every day, or making sure the trash was collected. Men were all about political opposition, the "fix," and being seen. They were less effective and more easily targeted.

My wife went to London with me while I got my degree, and then when she went to school in San Francisco for a degree in women's spirituality, I went there. That was the deal, and it was only fair.

Being a married gay boy in San Francisco was incredibly challenging. I was committed to my marriage and not willing to deal with my feelings about men.

After that I dragged my wife to Vermont, away from San Francisco where it's the best place to be when you're involved in women's spirituality. I worked with Rural Vermont on farm issues. Within a couple of months, my wife pushed

"Working with Outright has been a natural continuation of my activist process: global to statewide to local to personal."



tors who target vulnerable kids. Queer kids already know about keeping secrets.

I've had to deal with being attracted to men who look like the abuser, and with my dad being a power freak, I had an intimate understanding of the dynamics of power. I was overwhelmed by it.

What I did with that was to begin acting on my feelings in ways that weren't about me. I got involved in activism on war issues around the Gulf War in college. Then I worked

There were really two schools of thought: women in development, which was about getting women into positions of power as a way to create structural change; and gender and development, which was about the ways the current sexist structures oppress both genders.

EB: Somewhere in there was college, before graduate school, right?

CK: I went to Kenyon College. The Gay-Straight Alliance was two peo-

me out the door to a Radical Faeries' gathering.

It was terrifying. I was still bi-identified, and not very many gay men want to hang out with bisexual men. Nancy Sheltra, on the other hand, makes no distinction between gay and bi.

There were 40 Faeries in a room. It was such a discovery that not all men are evil. I had a shocking, mind-blowing epiphany. I would