

VCU Raises Funds, Sets Elective Strategy

If you're confused about the many incarnations of the folks working on civil union and gay marriage issues, join the club.

The fundraiser held at Burlington's Boat House in July was sponsored by the Vermont Fund for Families. More of us are familiar with Vermonters for Civil Unions and its political action committee, the VCU Legislative Defense Fund. Then there's the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force, which is a 501(c)3 tax exempt educational organization.

Of those four organizations, three are intimately connected and feature the same major players. The separate entity is the Freedom to Marry Task Force, whose task is educating Vermonters on issues about gay and lesbian marriage. They're the friends and allies who staff booths at the fair and speak to local organizations and clubs.

In a wide-ranging interview, attorney and VCU co-founder Beth Robinson helped sort out that tangle and answered other questions about fundraising and strategy for the upcoming elections.

Vermont Fund For Families – Our Families

The Vermont Fund for Families is the second of the two PACs associated with VCU. As a PAC, it raises funds that pay for advertising and lobbying for issues, legislation, and candidates. The July fundraiser "netted over \$3500," according to Robinson, with about 100 people attending. The additional PAC gives major donors another outlet to contribute up to \$2000 per person per PAC to the cause of safeguarding civil unions.

The combined fundraising goal for both VFF and VCULDF this year was set at \$300,000, although Robinson admitted that if they raised \$250,000 or even \$200,000, "that will do." The fund currently has \$20,000 in its coffers and has spent \$10,000. Most of its fundraising is through direct mail and phone calls, rather than events like the reception

at the Boat House.

Asked why the Vermont Fund for Families doesn't mention gays and lesbians in its name, why it sounds disturbingly like a right wing anti-gay organization (such as "Focus on the Family"), Robinson said, "This is a movement for civil rights for gays and lesbians, but the people who support us are really a gay-straight-bi alliance. I'm not willing to concede the pro-family turf to the right wing. Family is at the core of what the civil union law is all about."

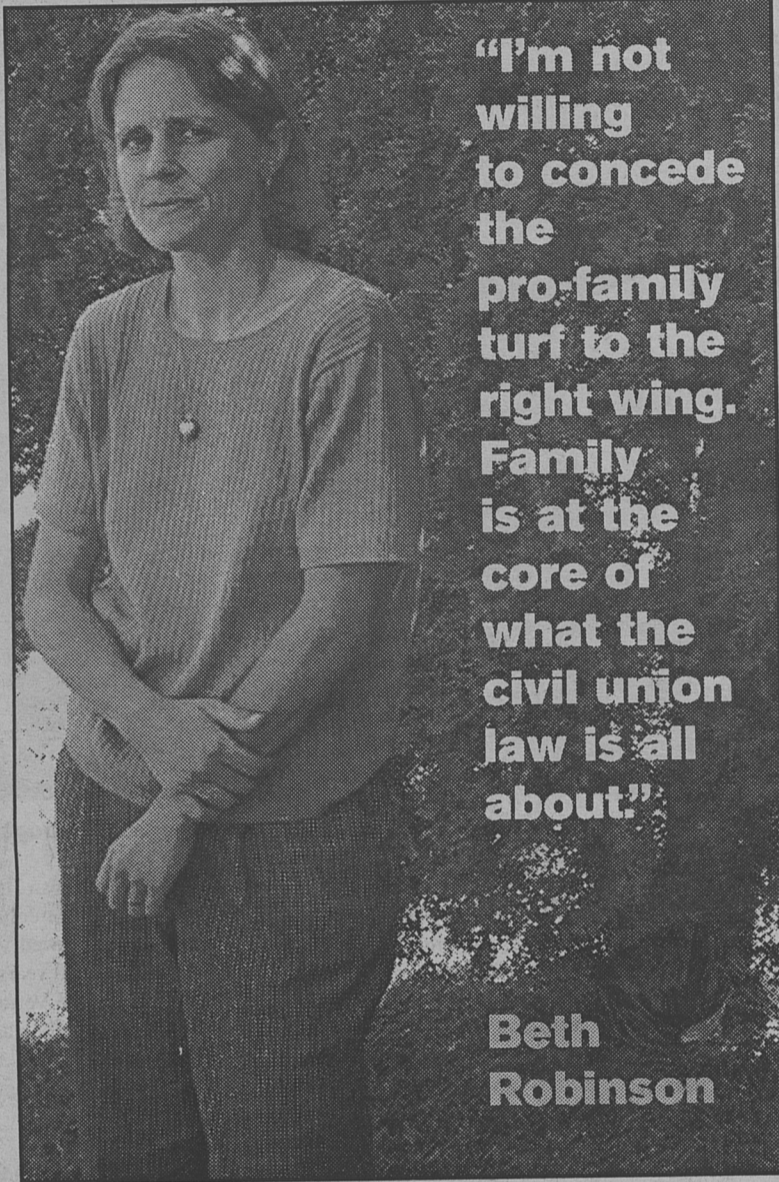
Robinson continued, "We might not be in crisis mode, and the overt anti-gay attacks have basically died away, [but] our work is not over yet." The money raised by VFF will be spent on indirect support – such as yard signs and media advertising – for civil union-friendly candidates.

Election Strategy: Focus on the Senate

The strategy this election season focuses on Senate races. "We cannot write off the House," said Robinson, "but the dominant focus is on the Senate." In the last session of the legislature, she noted, there was a mere two-vote majority of pro-civil union senators, and a "disproportionate number of retiring senators" this year come from among their ranks.

Despite the wave of retirements, the outlook to keep a pro-civil union, pro-gay and lesbian civil rights majority in the Senate is good, Robinson maintained, mentioning candidate Judy Murphy in Bennington, work in Addison County to unseat right wing conservative Sen. Tom Bahre, and the return of former Senator Mark McDonald to contest a seat in Orange County.

McDonald lost his seat in the anti-civil union backlash election of 2000 by a small margin. Even though the Democratic leadership was "twisting his arm" to vote against the bill because they knew they had the votes to pass it and they wanted to preserve his seat in the upcoming election, he voted his con-



science in favor of civil union.

"We're making good on our promise that if the legislators would stand by us, we would stand by them," said Robinson. At the same time, she acknowledged that few pro-CU candidates – if any – would be listing their civil union votes on their

campaign brochures. "It is definitely not the same as Howard Dean signing the CU bill in the closet. That was a slap in the face. We're not asking them to put their stance on civil unions in their brochures. That issue is less central this time, and it's time to get past the divisions. We think

they should talk about the bread and butter issues that affect all Vermonters."

Competitive Funding?

Robinson acknowledged that the sense of urgency prompting major donations to VCU in its various incarnations "clearly had an impact on other GLBTQ organizations." But that was then, she said. Current funding shortfalls are occurring across the community among most of our organizations. "The economy, with the stock market tanking, is affecting VCU, too." But, she added, "It's not just about money. We'll also be working to get bodies out there to help."

The battle to enact and protect civil unions, she said, was not just about a package of benefits for a minority of gay and lesbian couples. "It very clearly was and is about the inclusion of gays and lesbians in every way in Vermont society. Our issues are all interconnected, and yes," Robinson admitted, "civil union has gotten a disproportionate amount of attention and resources." She added, "This election could help us restore a balance."

When Is the Job Over?

"The job is never over, although its nature evolves and changes," Robinson concluded. "If we can get a substantial pro-civil union majority in the Senate, more and more wind will have blown through the sails of this issue." And more resources can be devoted to other civil rights issues.

Although Robinson acknowledged that a lot of work was done before VCU came on the scene, "This is the first time we've built a major political infrastructure. It doesn't make sense to walk away." She said that VCU would be present in the legislature to monitor relevant issues. She would like the organization to expand its focus in the future and "be helpful to other people's issues." ▼

anonymous

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others. Strength is acquired by training the faith response through the 14 steps."

In contrast, Outright Vermont's mission is to "foster sensitivity and understanding of the issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth ... challenge stereotypes and prejudice and create an environment ... free from the weight of hate and fear." And SafeSpace is "working to end physical, sexual, and emotional violence in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) people."

HA's website insists, "there is no such thing as a homosexual, only men and women, created by God heterosexually, who because of the broken world we live in, are confused over their sexual identity." Its mission con-

trasts starkly with that of the other two organizations. So why is the anti-gay organization listed under "Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Organizations and Services"? Andre says he purposely

will "help somebody that needs it." Lately, according to Andre, HA has been fairly inactive, though he helped found a second chapter in Bennington eight months ago.

"There is no such thing as a homosexual, only men and women, created by God heterosexually, who because of the broken world we live in, are confused over their sexual identity!"
Homosexuals Anonymous' website.

chosed to list HA there because he hoped it might "catch more attention."

Andre said he was inspired to start a chapter of HA because he "knew people who were gay ... knew the scene," and, through volunteer work with Vermont CARES, "knew a lot about AIDS." He says he hopes that his work with Homosexuals Anonymous

HA differs from its Yellow Pages neighbors, Andre said, because it's a non-denominational Christian organization "based on the word of God." Some potential members, he admits, have been put off by the organization's "basis on the Bible and the word."

Andre said that religious and

service organizations that include and affirm members of the LGBTQIA community are wrong. "We're not meant to be Adam and Steve ... [God] meant us to be man and woman, not man and man and woman and woman."

While HA holds the view that "homosexual activity is not in harmony with the will of God and that the universal creation norm is heterosexuality," other religious and spiritual organizations differ. Mike Brown, a co-pastor at Christ Church Presbyterian (CCP) on UVM's Redstone Campus in Burlington, comments, "There is no existing professional therapeutic organization that supports 'change ministry' or any such therapy; in fact, all the organizations specifically repudiate the effectiveness of such attempts to change basic orientation."

CCP's mission includes its identity as a "More Light" church. "We welcome all persons, regardless of sex-

ual orientation, into full participation in the life, membership, and leadership of this church, and strive, as part of the Body of Christ, to reach out in ministry to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people both within and outside of our congregation."

For LGBTQIA community members interested in religious support that does not involve a 14-step 'recovery' program, congregations like CCP provide a welcoming environment. Brown characterizes the ex-gay ministry phenomenon as "consistent with a culture that ... is still very supportive of denial." ▼

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