

Creating CIVIL UNION

Linda Hollingdale Documents Our History in Words and Pictures

The year was 2000, and, Hinesburg author Linda Hollingdale writes in the introduction to her new book, *Creating Civil Union: Opening Hearts and Minds*, she was looking for a new project to "mark and celebrate my 30 years as a photographer." She also wondered, "How will I ever be able to tell my nieces (then ages 7 and 3) what [the struggle for civil union] was really like?" That combination gave rise to her project, a photo/essay exhibit and book.

The exhibit of photographs is at the Flynndog Gallery (208 Flynn Ave., Burlington) from October 4 to November 9, 2002 with an opening reception on October 4, from 6 to 8 pm. The book, which Hollingdale is self-publishing as "Common Humanity Press," will also be available this month, even though the official publication date is November 1.

Hollingdale's collection of 47 black and white photographs with companion essays documents the legislative struggle for the right of gay/lesbian marriage that resulted in Vermont's historic civil union law. The participants in this collection of essays had worked to create and/or support civil union, and their writings reflect some of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the process. Included are perspectives from the Baker v. State plaintiffs and attorneys, several legislators and the governor, clergy members, volunteers, couples, parents, Justices of the Peace, town clerks, a lobbyist and a journalist.

"*Creating Civil Union* puts a human face on a very controversial issue," writes Hollingdale. "It both celebrates the amazing work of hundreds of citizens and serves as an invitation to readers and viewers to expand their awareness and understanding of this latest civil rights movement. Through the power of words and images, our common humanity is revealed."

Below is an excerpt from the book and its accompanying photo (although newsprint can rarely do justice to good photography). The words in italic are Hollingdale's; the rest belong to Sandi and Bobbi Cote-Whitacre.

Sandi and Bobbi Cote-Whitacre

We almost decided not to have a civil union. *This declaration may seem surprising coming from a couple who worked diligently in the fight for same-sex marriage. But Sandi and Bobbi were working for marriage, not some reasonable facsimile, such as civil union.*

The Baker v. State lawsuit was undertaken to win marriage rights for lesbian and gay couples. The Vermont Supreme Court upheld the legal basis for that right. However, rather than granting same-sex couples the right to marry, the Court handed the job of "crafting" the details of this right to the Vermont Legislature. The result of that work, civil union, was consid-



Sandi and Bobbi Cote-Whitacre with Bobbi's mom Betty.

ered a compromise. Sandi and Bobbi believe that the only ones who compromised were the people who were denied their full rights. The opposition to same-sex marriage didn't compromise; they were against same-sex marriage, they are against civil union, and they would take it away if given the chance.

Even though Bobbi and Sandi understood the desire of the legislature to find relative comfort for everyone, they also knew that the price for that comfort would fall on the shoulders of the people who continued to be marginalized. There comes a time in every civil rights movement when the carrot is dangled in front of the fighters, when the words "wait" and "don't go so fast" are heard in the court of public opinion. The carrot of compromise was dangling in front of us, and after much soul-searching, we came to the conclusion that to reach for this carrot would hurt not only those of us fighting for our rights now; it would condemn future generations to decades of work dismantling this compromise.

History often reminds us of this dilemma. One example in 1896 was the case of Plessy v. Ferguson, in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld lower court rulings that supported the "separate but equal" racial laws. The lone dissenter was Justice John Harlan. Harlan said, "The destinies of the two races in this country are indissolubly linked together, and the interests of both require that the common government of all shall not permit the seeds of hatred to be planted under the sanction of law." Now replace "races" with "orientations."

Sandi and Bobbi see a parallel with civil union. What can more certainly arouse hate, what can more certainly create and perpetuate a feeling of distrust between gays and straights, than state enactments which in fact proceed on the ground that gays and lesbians are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to marry like straights? That is the real meaning of such legislation as civil union, the thin disguise of

"equal" benefits for couples in committed relationships. We, as a movement, must continue to stay the course; we must stay focused on the "rights" of marriage and not just the "benefits." Civil rights can never be decided by a plebiscite, and we cannot agree to give up our human rights without admitting we are less than human. We don't have the right to take the immediate partial benefits that are being dangled in front of us at the expense of future generations.

Nevertheless, on July 1, 2000, the civil union bill became law. The paradoxical nature of this law leaves many Vermonters feeling elated and validated by having their relationships legally recognized, while still feeling like second-class citizens. Bobbi and Sandi hope that this compromise will encourage those who don't feel comfortable with same-sex marriage to take the opportunity to see lesbian and gay relationships in a positive light.

When asked why they decided to be joined in civil union, Sandi and Bobbi smiled and looked at Betty Whitacre, Bobbi's 85-year-old mother, who said, "I just wanted the opportunity to see them get married. I didn't want to run out of time."

To ensure this opportunity, Betty's support went beyond the personal. Using her message, "They can't do this to my girls," the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force sent out a fundraising letter that brought in thousands of dollars.

Betty understands the concerns of Bobbi and Sandi, because as a very religious person she wanted them to marry in a church. And even though their civil union was not full-fledged marriage, she was proud to say that there were three ministers at Bobbi and Sandi's ceremony. She is grateful to have witnessed her daughter and daughter-in-law's wedding – so much so, that she celebrated by dancing with "her girls" at their reception! ▼

Linda Hollingdale lives in Hinesburg.

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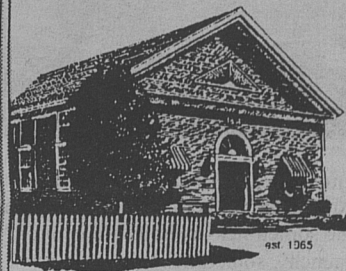
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