

community profile

BY EUAN BEAR

Rob Parzych's daddy was a cop, but he insists that he never tried to follow in his father's footsteps. It just sort of ... happened, kind of. Rob works as the civilian supply officer for the Burlington Police Department. Think Radar O'Reilly from the TV series *M.A.S.H.*, but way more organized and much more personable.

Following a journey through twisting, turning corridors in the police station at the corner of North Avenue and Battery Street, we settle in his office, where his computer screensaver displays in 3-inch letters the questions that run his professional life: Rob, I need ...; Rob, I want ...; Rob, do you know ...; Rob, have you got ... In fact, during the hour of our interview, on an official holiday when he wasn't even scheduled to work, two officers in mufti stop by with requests (one for keys to the supply room for an "ammo count") and another in uniform escorts the UPS driver in with a delivery.

If you're of a certain age or have read much gay history, you know that the police in most jurisdictions have not been our friends as a community. In New York and other cities, police were bribed by bar owners to leave the customers alone, but sometimes came back and raided the establishments anyway, routinely beating and harassing gay men, drag queens, and lesbians, parading them past reporters and releasing their names and addresses to the press. Police have ignored for years the possibility that a gay man could be raped, and that it was a prosecutable crime. Too often in the past they have been slow to answer and eager to lose the paperwork on calls about anti-gay violence and reluctant to look for or arrest the perpetrators.

But now gay cops march in pride parades – just not ours, or at least, not yet. And Rob Parzych, who says he always knew he was gay, is the supply officer for the Burlington police and couldn't be happier.

Rob was born in Sturbridge, Massachusetts – yes, that Sturbridge. His father was not only a cop, but a security officer for Old Sturbridge Village. With the promise of another job, Rob's dad moved the family to New Hampshire, but the job offer evaporated, and the family moved to Bellows Falls when a work opening was offered. Parzych senior eventually settled in at the Windham County Sheriff's office.

Rob came out publicly and to his parents when he was 17 and graduated from high school in Bellows Falls. "High school," he says, "was all about survival. It was all about being small and invisible and trying not to get beat up. I was chubby and short for my age. Then when I was 19, I lost 45 pounds and grew three inches. Nobody recognized me at the next reunion."

He moved to Burlington in 1985 to be with a boyfriend soon after graduation, and that's when he came out to his mom. "I was getting ready to move and my mother was kind of wondering about this 30-

year-old man I was moving in with. 'So, is he gay?' she asked. I said, 'Yes he is.' Then she said, 'Well, are you?' I just said, 'Yeah' and started laughing. She asked me if I wanted to 'talk to someone' and I said no, I'm fine with it. Then she said, 'As long as you're safe and happy.' She asked me not to tell my father yet, she wanted to tell him first."

His coming out wasn't so hard, Rob said, because he had heard his father's comments after he'd been called to the gay-owned Andrews Inn in Bellows Falls to break up fighting. It turned out to be "some local

"meter checker" he quickly corrects me – and he applied and got the job in 1998.

"You know, if you're in the job because it's about the power, you need to find another job," Rob says. "It wasn't just the meters, I was out there as an ambassador for the city. There'd be kids locked in a car, or dogs on a hot day, or I'd be giving directions. One time there was a naked guy on Church Street in a tee shirt and sneakers and nothing else. It was a little tough to know how to call that one in. I've checked and there's no 10-code for that.

Chief's Award.

The Chief's Award – a handsome plaque attesting to the honor hangs in Rob's cubicle, festooned with his colleagues' notes of affectionate ego-deflating humor – is the highest award bestowed on a civilian by the Burlington Police in conjunction with the Rotary Club. It stands for doing a good job, "above and beyond the everyday stuff," says Rob.

Rob's boss, Burlington Police business manager Lise Veronneau, virtually gushes when she explains why Rob got the award: he

attended Rob and his partner Steve Porter's civil union ceremony and has written a recommendation for them as prospective adoptive parents. Their homestudy was done and paperwork completed in May. Now they're waiting for the magic call to let them know they'll be parents. "It doesn't matter to us if it's a boy or a girl. It's all about the birth mother – she gets to choose whether we'll be parents. Waiting is the hardest part. I tell myself it's not that different from straight parents – they wait to conceive, and then they wait nine months after that."

Rob says he's prepared for the changes that parenthood will bring. "I used to babysit all the time. And yes, you get to give them back, but for me, it got to the point where I didn't want to give them back." He shows off a photo of himself holding an officer's new baby. "Other people here bring me their children," he says.

"It'll be chaos, but we're set. I mean, how prepared can you be? And who knew there was that much paperwork? Have you ever seen adoption paperwork?" he asks incredulously.

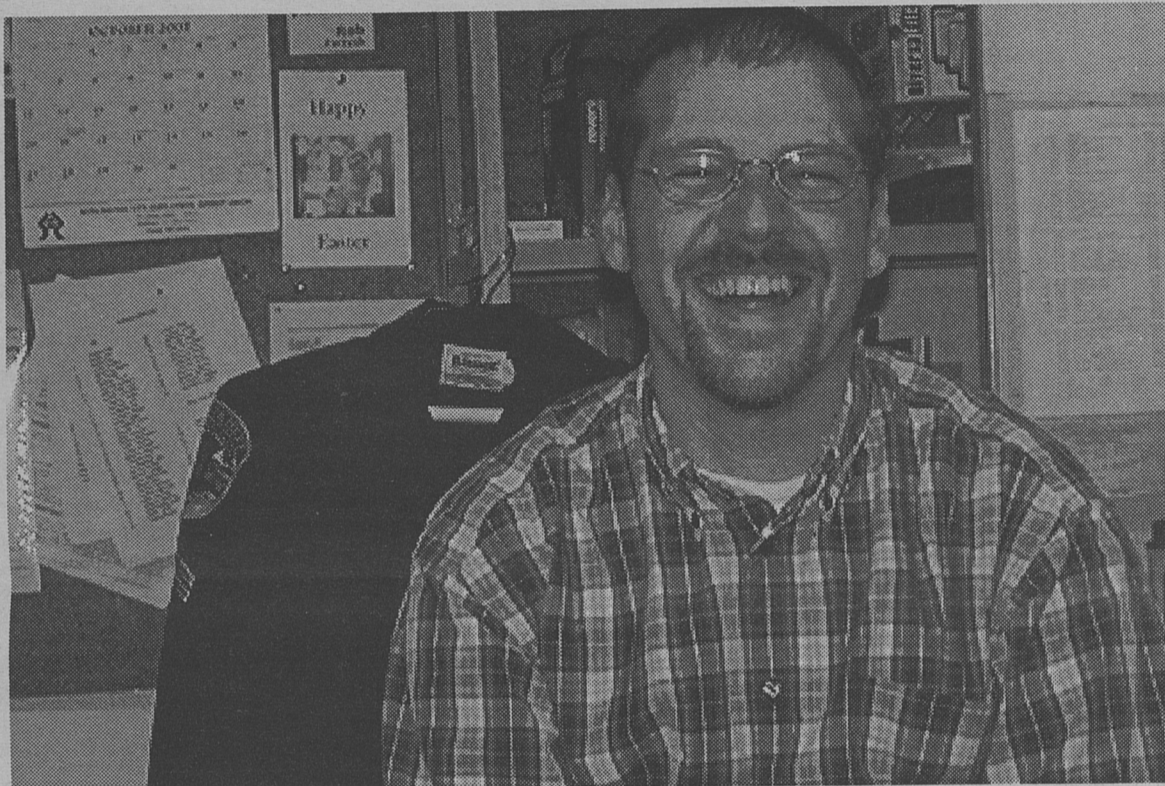
"My worst fears are the birth mom changing her mind and dealing with daycare. I get four months parental leave here, and I can maybe stretch that out by working part-time. My boss here is very good about letting me know I can have a flexible schedule.

"I never dreamed I would be doing this. If anyone had told me even five years ago that I'd be the supply officer for the Burlington Police Department, I would have said they were crazy. What an amazing group of people we have here," he enthuses.

If there's less prejudice than some of us might expect at the police department or in other city departments, it might be due at least in part to Rob – not just his example as a gay man, but his presence on the board that screens applicants for city jobs. "There's usually one person from the department they're applying for, and a supervisor or superior officer, and one other person. I'm usually the 'other person,' mostly because I've done it so much. You can see people's biases – our interview questions cut right to the quick. That way we can weed out undesirables. You'd be amazed at how people talk about their prejudices against one group or another," Rob marvels.

"Never once have I come up against prejudice here. I'm not an in-your-face guy – being gay is just part of who I am," Rob declares. "I've been at the bar when there's been a call [to the police] for service, and I see them handling it like any other call for service. There's a whole new level of respect, and of treating people as people.

"Everyone gets [anti-]sexual harassment training. There's just no tolerance for discrimination. I don't see any prejudice here. Of course when I first started I didn't exactly announce myself. But once I got more confidence and got to know people more, and they got to know me ..."



Rob Parzych Who Keeps Burlington's Cops in Bullets and Paperclips?

drunks picking fights with the customers. My dad said, 'Why can't those guys just leave them alone – they're not bothering anybody.'" Rob's Mom actually ended up working at the Andrews Inn part time, stamping hands for the Friday night dances.

After telling his parents he was gay, he started telling others in his life. "With each person, it just got easier. I told my [younger] brother, and he said, 'I don't care.' My brother is super straight, we're really opposites, but we get along real well."

Not having a college degree hasn't held him back because he's able and eager to learn. "Limitations are something you put on yourself," he says.

He got several jobs in retail, including one that took him to Maine. When the Once A Tree (now Symmetree) store in Portland burned down, Rob came back to Burlington to work in the Church Street store. He eventually tired of working retail and started looking for something more secure, a job with benefits. There was an ad for a meter maid –

"Of course, once I did call it in to Dispatch, all the other meter checkers converged from all over the city. It was a guy who had decided on this hot day to take a little walk from some group home and he just kind of forgot his pants. An officer came and picked him up."

After 18 months on meter duty, Rob saw that a new business manager had opened up the position of supply officer to civilian applicants. Previously it had been held by uniformed officers assigned to light duty for various reasons or who were nearing retirement, or it was shared among a number of officers. The job needed to be consolidated and centralized. And Rob was the man for the job.

"I am the primary – the only – purchaser for all of the department's supplies: bullets to paperclips, uniforms, weaponry, office supplies, bulletproof vests, service contracts, food vending machines, rubber gloves, everything," he says with some pride. The pride is justified: after all, he has been twice nominated as employee of the year for the city of Burlington and last year earned the

"pays attention to details, he understands what an individual needs – often before they do – he saves us money and is very good about staying within our budget, he's creative ... I could give you a list a mile long of projects that he's been involved with. Our mission statement as a department lists four qualities we strive to achieve: integrity, creativity, service, and respect. Ron exemplifies all four." And, she noted, Rob got this award after only one year of service.

Naturally, as supply officer, Rob ordered his own plaque, though he says the guys were sneaky about it so he wouldn't know it was for him. Rob even picked it up at the engraver without tumbling to the secret. Burlington Police Chief Alana Ennis handed out other awards, and the Chief's Award was the last of the evening. Even though the Chief had invited Rob and his partner to the awards dinner and suggested that he might want to dress up a bit more than usual, "It was a total surprise and shock. The Chief read off a wonderful speech," Rob recalls.

Chief Ennis has also