



CARTOONING AS COMMENTARY:

**BURLINGTON THERAPIST
LEAH WITTENBERG'S
'FREE TIME' ACTIVITY
DRAWS ON HER
POLITICAL CONSCIENCE.
BY EUAN BEAR**

“I started cartooning in 1980, in *CommonWoman*. At first it was just stick figures with captions,” says Leah Wittenberg. “*CommonWoman* supported almost anything we tried to do.”

Wittenberg, a long-time resident of Vermont, is originally from Queens, New York, as anyone who hears her distinctive accent might guess. She came to Vermont in 1973 and built a house in Montgomery. The house burned down, and Wittenberg moved to Burlington in 1975 and came out as a lesbian. She’s had a number of careers, including commercial sewing piecework (wool jackets and canvas boat covers), custom-made western-style shirts, manager of shipping at Seventh Generation, and massage therapy. For the past several years she’s been a therapist in practice in Burlington. And a political cartoonist.

“The first time I thought of myself as a cartoonist was when I did a cover for *CommonWoman* – it was an anti-war cover that I did with Carol Altobelli. I did a lot of cartooning during Reagan’s reign.

“Up until recently,” Wittenberg continues, “I haven’t even considered myself as able to draw. It’s something I really have to work at. Some cartoonists can take one feature of a person and exaggerate it and it works. Generally, I’m pretty happy if I get a likeness.”

Recent cartoons have focused more on national issues, but Wittenberg has done panels on environmental and local issues. “Two years ago I was drawing about civil union and anti-[then-ultra conservative gubernatorial candidate Nancy] Sheltra. It’s kind of whatever is in the forefront of news and issues. National issues are where my attention is right now. I’ve done lots and lots of lesbian-related cartoons. In the early 1980s, I was doing them on the development of the [Burlington] Waterfront, with the Alden Corporation.”

Publishing in print media is the venue of choice, but not being published has not stopped her from getting her message out. “For awhile I was drawing three-part cartoons and cut them into strips that I put under people’s wiper blades. What’s important is getting the message out there.”

Wittenberg adds, “Cartooning is one of the few ways I’m being political right now and making commentary.”

Wittenberg has been paid by other publications for her cartoons, but admits that it is

hard to break in to the ranks of regularly paid cartoonists. “I have rejection letters from all over. I just got a rejection letter from *Funny Times* that basically said, ‘We thought you were funny but not funny enough.’ The *New Yorker* sends what I think must be the shortest rejections ever on a three-by-four-inch piece of paper that they must get six or eight copies per sheet. My cartoons have been rejected by *Utne Reader* and *The Nation*.”

But, Wittenberg adds, “There’s also a lot of places I’ve had cartoons printed in, besides *Out in the Mountains*. I just sold a cartoon to *In the Family*, which is a lesbian/gay therapy magazine – not especially clinical. I got third place in a *Free Press* cartooning contest a couple of years ago. I’ve been published in *Sojourner*,” a women’s journal published out of Boston. She also had a show that hung at the Daily Bread Bakery and Café in Richmond.

“There have been long stretches when I haven’t done any cartoons. The first bunch of years I was a parent, I did nothing with cartoons. I didn’t have the energy.” She quickly adds, “Though Rosa’s really into it. I’m teaching a cartooning class at The Schoolhouse,” where daughter Rosa goes to school. Responding to a suggestion about teaching a class through the R.U.1.2? lgbtq community center in Burlington, Wittenberg says, “Well, that’s a whole other thing – with Alison [Bechdel] in the community, I’m a very poor second. Plus there’s the issue of time.”

Probably every creative person fields the question about where they get their ideas. Leah’s answer is one I’ve never heard before: “I pray for cartoons, and they come to me in flashes of inspiration. I can sit down and ‘force’ a cartoon, but I’m not usually very happy with it. Sometimes a little lightbulb goes off when I’m driving. If I am thinking about something I’d like to do a cartoon about, before bed I pray for a cartoon idea. Sometimes they just come whole. My same-sex marriage cartoon came that way.”

And then, Wittenberg says, it pretty much takes over her free time. “It also takes over the dining room table. I don’t have room in my house for a drawing space, and my desk is in my bedroom, so I set up my light box on the dining room table.” She uses the light box to create the finished cartoon, tracing over the rough sketch using good pens – “because I don’t do it on the computer, though I do use letter-