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MONT'S VOICE FOR THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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BY EUAN BEAR

This is not a Christmas story – or at least, not yet, though George Smith keeps hoping. This Christmas will be the second one since George Smith reported being assaulted in a bar just down the street from his Montgomery Center home. It is the second Christmas that he's been waiting for law enforcement and civil rights agencies to help him get some measure of justice. But maybe this Christmas will be different, and maybe Santa Claus will find his way to the rural eastern Franklin County town at the foot of Jay Peak and leave something special under George's tree this year.

George is gay and makes no secret of it. He's also disabled – though his disabilities are not obvious – and not able to work. He lives in a Section 8-subsidized apartment and cannot afford his own lawyer. He says that none of the agencies he has contacted about being assaulted has been able to bring the perpetrators to justice or get the bar shut down. Those agencies include local police, state police, the Northwest Unit on Special Investigations (NUSI), the Franklin County State's Attorney, the office of the Vermont Attorney General, the state's Human Rights Commission, the Vermont chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, and, only recently, SafeSpace.

On October 20, 2001, Steven George Smith – George to his friends – walked from his apartment on Route 118, Montgomery Center's main street, to a bar called The Longhorn Trout. That he was in the bar is not in dispute, but nearly everything else that happened there that night is. That the machinery of law and human rights cranks slowly for outsiders like George – gay, disabled, poor, and "from away" – is becoming more and more evident as the months go by.

Here's the way George tells it.

"I moved to Vermont from Florida about a year and a half ago because of civil unions. My mate of 12 years stayed in Florida – he didn't want to get married. We're still best friends.

"I was homeless when I got here. I met someone in Burlington and moved in with him, but it was an abusive relationship. After



JUSTICE DELAYED:

Assault Victim George Smith Waits for the System to Work in Franklin County

one bad fight, I started looking for housing and found this Section 8 [subsidized] apartment in Montgomery finally after 60 or 70 apartment

searches. I get Section 8 because I have a burst bladder, a broken heart valve, and a neck injury from being [accidentally] hung as a child on a

jungle gym. I got permanent disability after I was injured at work.

"General Assistance pays \$198 a month; Section 8 pays \$197 a month; and I get \$56 a month in Food Stamps.

"Meeting people is not the easiest thing when you're disabled. I'm 38 years old and I'm not ready to live like a hermit.

"I'd been to the Longhorn Trout four or five times with a waitress friend from Zack's [on the Rocks, formerly a restaurant in Montgomery Center]. Once I went in there alone and I was verbally harassed: 'This isn't a faggot bar.'

"I'm out in the community. I volunteer and do what I can do. When I walk down the street or go into a bar, you can actually see it being passed around – the gay news – especially in a redneck bar.

"I went there that night because I had some birthday money from my mother. I went there [even after previous verbal harassment] because it's a bar in my neighborhood and I'm entitled to walk up the street for a drink, you know what I mean? The owners would never protect me, but they'd never done anything to me themselves. The owner didn't get involved, and I just hoped that the same people wouldn't be there that night. I asked [two or three people] and they assured me that it was a safe bar for gay people to drink in ... that the Longhorn Trout was safe for gay people trying to meet decent people who would treat me like a human being. I get harassed on the street, name calling, giving me the finger, spitting. In 2002 we should be beyond that, you know what I mean?"

"On October 20-21, 2001 was the assault. At 8:30 I went to the bar. I got a rum and coke and sat at the far left side of the bar. There were maybe five or six other people and one bartender. Actually there was one bartender and the owner's son. I had about one drink per hour from 8 to midnight. The bartender kept verbally harassing me, saying things like, 'You want a date? I'll set you up, I'll make some calls.' It was the farthest thing from my mind that people were going to hurt me. He made some calls and people started showing up like it was a lynching.

"I tried to mind my own business.

The harassment was intermittent.

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community profile: Sherriff Sheila Prue Takes Charge in Windham County

BY EUAN BEAR

It was a close race, with the winner pulling out a victory by only 261 votes. "It was close on 3 a.m. when the final tally came in," said the winning candidate in a phone interview a few days post-election. Sheila Prue will be sworn in as the first female sheriff of Windham County on February 1, 2003 – barring recount results that might erase the winning margin. She'll have one gender peer in Vermont – Grand Isle

County's Connie Allen, who ran unopposed. The two women are the first female sheriffs in Vermont's history. The fact that Prue is a lesbian never openly entered the campaign.

Prue beat Republican Henry Farnum, who had been appointed last February by Governor Howard Dean to fulfill the term of retiring Sheriff William Graham. As of press time, Farnum had requested the recount, saying he owed it to the voters. Farnum has also suggested that Prue is unqualified.

Prior to the general election

contest, Prue earned the right to compete for the office when she beat two other men in the Democratic primary by large margins. On primary day, both of those men agreed not to run independent campaigns in the general election. Dennis Mathieu reneged on that promise and ran as an independent. Claude Weyant, the other primary candidate, decided to launch a write-in campaign less than a week before the election. Both trailed far behind in vote totals.

When I met Sheila Prue and Kris Gaudiniere, her partner of

eight years, at the bakery they owned (then in the process of being sold) on the Friday before the election, Prue was upbeat and fairly confident, eager to explain some of the initiatives she hoped to lead the Sheriff's department into. The door of the bakery displayed a big wanted poster: Wanted: Sheila for Sheriff.

Prue, a compactly built gray-haired 49-year-old, grew up in Bennington, Vermont, and joined the army after being turned down for jobs with the Bennington police force. She served seven years as a

member of the Military Police, including a stint guarding Cubans released from Castro's jails to take part in the Mariel boatlift.

When Prue left the army, she applied to the Brattleboro Police Department and was hired. After four years, she earned a promotion to sergeant, the rank she left with 14 years later. After leaving the police force, she and her partner bought the Upper Crust Bakery, tucked away in the Harmony parking lot behind the buildings

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