

VT's Legislative Election Results Likely to Keep Civil Unions Safe

BY PAUL OLSEN

While Vermont's election results proved to be a mixed bag for the state's gay and lesbian community, civil union supporters don't see the outcome as a threat to the nation's first and so-far only civil union law.

Republicans Jim Douglas and Brian Dubie won the races for Governor and Lieutenant Governor respectively. In campaigns focused primarily on the economy, Douglas narrowly defeated Democratic Lt. Governor Doug Racine, while Dubie outpolled both Democrat state Sen. Peter Shumlin and Progressive Anthony Pollina.

Although neither Douglas nor Dubie received 50 percent of the vote as required by the Vermont Constitution, both received the most votes and their opponents conceded the races. As a result, members of the Vermont legislature are expected to appoint Douglas Governor and Dubie Lt. Governor by secret ballot in January.

None of the candidates for Governor or Lt. Governor called for outright repeal of the civil union law during the 2002 campaign, but they did differ in their level of support for the landmark law. Racine, Shumlin and Pollina were strong supporters, while Douglas and Dubie were open to changing it.

In interviews previously published in *Out in the Mountains*, Dubie said he supported a Defense of Marriage Act defining marriage as a union between one man and one

woman, and Douglas declined to say whether he would have signed H.502. That was a bill introduced by antigay legislators to repeal civil unions and replace them with a broader domestic partnership program for any two adults who could not legally marry. The bill was widely regarded as an attempt to weaken the social comparability of lesbian and gay civil union with heterosexual marriage.

Despite their support for changes to the civil union law, Douglas and Dubie are unlikely to succeed in amending it, thanks to results of legislative races.

Civil union activists were pleased with the new makeup of the Vermont legislature. "We're thrilled to announce that in the legislative races, where Vermonters for Civil Unions (VCU) focused the bulk of our energies, the news is downright exciting," VCU representatives Beth Robinson, Susan Murray and Jakki Flanagan wrote in a post-election message to civil union supporters.

In the end, Vermont's House of Representatives is split with the GOP holding 74 seats (including one incumbent who ran and was elected as a Democrat but changed his party affiliation to Republican soon after election), and Democrats, Progressives and Independents together holding the remaining 76. The result of these numbers is that the Democrats may take control of the pivotal Speaker of the House position in January. According to Rep. Bill Lippert of Hinesburg, two of the three Independents are likely to vote with Democrats, at least on the choice for Speaker.

In the state Senate, Democrats will hold an eight-seat majority.

"On the Senate side, we held on to all of the pro-civil union seats that were at risk, and then picked up three new friends, bringing the pro-civil union majority in the Senate to 20-10," Robinson, Murray and Flanagan said. "On the House side, the news is equally inspiring. Although we suffered some disappointing losses, in all, we picked up many more pro-civil union seats than we lost. Perhaps the most exciting pickup is the Grand Isle seat won by Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force coordinator Mitzi Johnson."

Openly gay candidates also did well on Election Day. Incumbent state Reps. Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg) and Robert Dostis (D-Waterbury) won reelection, while Democrat Sheila Prue from Brattleboro made history by being elected the nation's second openly lesbian sheriff (barring enough vote counting mistakes to overturn the 261-vote margin in a recount requested by defeated incumbent Republican Sheriff Henry Farnum). Randy Guy of Chester lost his bid for the House of Representatives to an incumbent Republican.

In the race for the state's lone seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, incumbent independent Rep. Bernie Sanders easily beat Republican Bill Meub, 65 percent to 32 percent. Since being elected to Congress in 1990, Sanders has garnered 100 percent positive ratings

from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a national gay rights group. He has also received a 100 percent ratings from the AIDS Action Council, a group representing more than 1,000 community based AIDS service organizations.

In other statewide races, Democrat Jeb Spaulding won the State Treasurer's office in his first nonlegislative contest, and three Democratic incumbents — Attorney General William Sorrell, State Auditor Elizabeth Ready, and Secretary of State Deb Markowitz — were all re-elected. ▼

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With civil unions safe, what's next for VCU?

Now that it looks like the civil unions law is safe for the next two years, what's in the future for Vermonters for Civil Unions and its political action committees?

"That's a good question," VCU co-founder Beth Robinson candidly replied. "We will be trying to brainstorm the possibilities with the founders and the people who have had a commitment to the organization. Clearly, having a statewide political organization focused on civil unions has outlived itself."

Robinson was reluctant to put any of her own ideas in play until the organizers can meet together for a fuller discussion. The

process, she said, will likely take at least six months.

"But we're not about to shutter the windows and squander the energy, the increased political sophistication, the [mailing and volunteer] lists, the human resources we've developed over the years," Robinson declared.

One idea she has heard from others is to turn the group into a broader-based "gaypac" or a statewide lobbying organization. "Lobbying is essentially reactive, monitoring and responding to a particular issue. Natural forces usually bring appropriate lobbyists to the surface," Robinson mused, indicating that such a role might be too narrow for

the organization.

She acknowledged that in the recent election, the gay and lesbian community became aware of its potential power to influence the outcome — not only through writing checks to civil union-supportive candidates, but by working directly on campaigns and initiating neighbor-to-neighbor conversations about issues.

"The energy we had in the 2000 elections was defensive, but now it's more positive, and we made a huge difference," the Middlebury lawyer concluded. "We can take on bigger political issues," she said, "and whoever takes the reins may move in the direction."

Asked whether

the comment was a hint that she would resign from the leadership, Robinson hedged. "Not really. I'll still be involved however it evolves. I just think it'll take on more of an institutional character," something she and co-spokeswomen Susan Murray and Jakki Flanagan have resisted. "Institutional character" includes "process, process meetings, mission statements," and so on, she said.

It would be "premature" so soon after the election to suggest what direction the group will go in or the shape of its future incarnation, Robinson indicated. "Right now we're wrapping things up and taking stock. I'm pretty happy with how the elections turned out." ▼

Burlington Honors Transgender Victims of Violence

BY JUDITH E. BECKETT

Gwen Araujo's body was found on Wednesday, Oct. 15, in a shallow grave near a campground 150 miles northeast of Newark, California. The seventeen-year-old transgendered teenager had been bludgeoned, tied up, and strangled with a rope after the youth's biological sex was discovered at a house party. Born Eddie Araujo, the youth was reported missing by Sylvia Guerrero, on October 5 when Araujo had not returned home for two days.

Gwen Araujo is just one of 25 transgendered individuals who have died as a result of hate-crime violence since October of last year. November 20th marked the fourth annual National Transgender Day of Remembrance to memorialize those who have been killed because of anti-transgender hatred and prejudice. This year Burlington honored transgender victims for the first time, joining dozens of cities in 19 states across the U.S. and in Canada, Chile and Spain in the 4-year-old memorial observance.

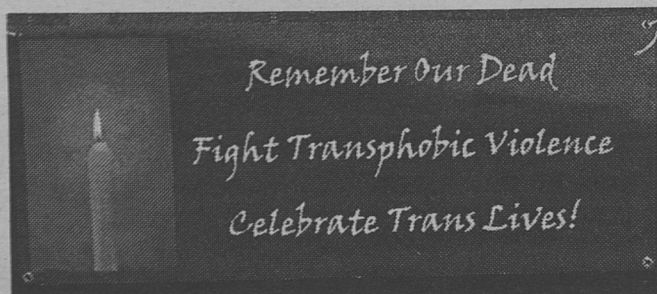
Organizers set up a visual display honoring the dead on the steps of Burlington's City Hall. Although not every person represented had self-identified as transgendered — transsexual, crossdresser, or gender-variant — each was a victim of violence based on bias against transgendered people.

The display was followed by a candlelight procession to Union Station where a speak-out occurred. Members of the trans community, their allies, families, and friends had the opportunity to express their sadness and rage.

Samuel Lurie, who helped with the planning of Burlington's Day of Remembrance, said he has been amazed and heartened at the strong outpouring of support and interest in this

continue," Jerman said. She hoped the event gave "visibility to the things that trans people face every day that others aren't even aware of." Although Jerman has not yet lost anyone close to her to anti-trans violence, she believes that "one of these days it's not going to be a stranger but a friend, a lover or a trans youth that I work with."

In California, four young men have been arrested and charged with Araujo's murder



event in Burlington.

Kate Jerman, another organizer, said she became interested in bringing the Day of Remembrance to Vermont after attending two such events in New York City. When she brought the idea to Outright Vermont Executive Director B.J. Rogers, he was very much behind it.

"For me the event is about mourning the dead and making the statement that this has to stop, that the violence will not be allowed to

as of press time: Michael William Magidson, 27, Jaron Chase Nabors, 19, Jose Antonio Merel, 24, and Jason Cazares, 22,

It was reportedly Paul Merel's girlfriend, Nicole Brown, who discovered Araujo's sexual identity after taking the youth into a bathroom for that purpose. When Brown announced that Araujo was a boy, Jose Merel, Nabors and Magidson allegedly beat Araujo to the floor then dragged the semi-conscious body to the garage and strangled the youth.

A visual display at City Hall and candlelight procession honored hate crime victims on the 4th annual National Transgender Day of Remembrance

All four face hate-crime charges and possible death sentences. Activists from the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) warn that there is a possibility that a "trans-panic" defense may be attempted since there are some reports that Araujo may have had a relationship with one of the suspects.

Police are also investigating individuals at the party who could have prevented or reported the murder but did not.

Araujo's aunt, Imelda Guerrero, said Gwen was "a beautiful person inside and out." School officials and teachers describe Araujo as "happy-go-lucky" and intelligent. They expressed shock and sadness at the news of the murder.

But Sylvia Guerrero, Araujo's mother, said that her child had been so harassed and taunted at school that Araujo eventually dropped out. Equally troubling are reports that potential employers refused to hire Gwen due to the youth's gender identity.

Ironically, Gwen's death occurred shortly before the Newark Memorial High School presented the "Laramie Project," a play examining the affect that the murder of openly gay college student Matthew Shepard in 1998 had on the town of Laramie, Wyoming.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reports that, so far, media coverage has been mixed. GLAAD has begun working with the media to correct basic errors regarding inaccurate ter- >>