

# community profile

cont'd from page 1 Brattleboro's steep Main Street.

"Being away from law enforcement has really helped me get a different perspective on people," Prue said in our interview.

"Especially the kids, like the ones who hang out here or in the parking lot. It's very different being able to get to know them out of uniform. They're not as defensive, particularly the kids."

She and Gaudiniere have three daughters between them, so of course they have a deep concern about the kids. The issue came up almost as soon as we sat down in the Mole's Eye View, a bar and restaurant across the parking lot from the bakery.

"My top priority is children, their safety," Prue began. "You probably know that I've pledged that any direct campaign contributions I receive are going to the Child Locator Program. I want our county to be the model program for the state."

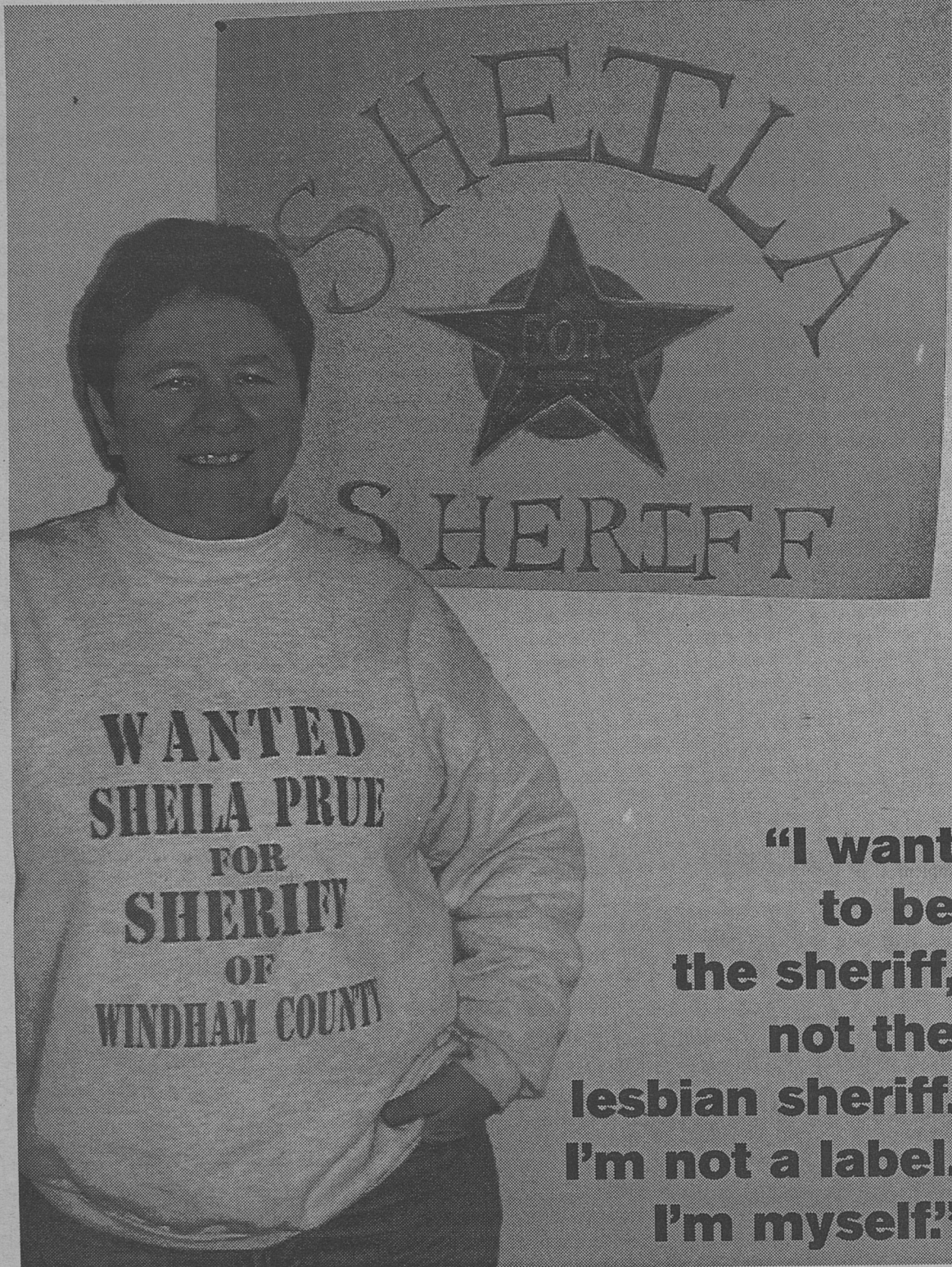
Kris Gaudiniere is equally invested in bringing the program to Windham County. "We get grant money to set it up and buy the bracelets," she eagerly explained. "It means building cell towers to transmit the location of any child wearing a bracelet."

Any parent who wishes would enroll their child in the program and equip the child with a locator bracelet with a personalized code. The bracelet would have a 'panic button' the child could push when he or she is in trouble, or that would automatically emit a signal when the bracelet was being tampered with. Or a parent might notify the sheriff's department that a child is missing, and the sheriff's computer program would display, on request, the location of the bracelet whose code is entered into the program. The object is to keep track of runaways and children who have been abducted, Prue explained.

I asked whether child abduction and runaways were a serious and frequent issue in Windham County. "Runaways are more of a problem than child abductions," Prue acknowledged.

Another project Prue is proposing was characterized by her opposition as "an art project": the Windham Walk. The goal is to involve the community in a county-wide project fostered by the Sheriff's Department that would provide an artistic outlet for kids, connections between kids and seniors, an attraction for tourists and, eventually, jobs for the community. "It's crime prevention and economic development — they go hand in hand," explained Gaudiniere.

"Because it's art-focused, it brings the community together and helps the economy of Windham County," added Prue. Her vision is a county-wide walkway in every community, made of bricks or tiles donated and/or made by community members, wandering through historic sites



**"I want to be the sheriff, not the lesbian sheriff. I'm not a label. I'm myself!"**

## Sherriff Sheila Prue Taking Charge in Windham County

and dotted with outdoor sculptures and other art projects along the way. "There would be graffiti walls for the kids," said Prue. "There could be alcoves for sculptures and art installations, we could get kids in the neighborhood to work on and show their art instead of hanging out and getting into trouble," added Gaudiniere.

"It would be a draw for tourists," Prue pointed out. "It would transform the county into an outdoor art gallery. It's crime prevention. It's like holding hands with the community. Deputies would be involved and mingle with community members."

"It would provide jobs for kids as tour guides," Gaudiniere said.

"The kids who are hanging out on Elliot street, instead of the seniors being afraid of them, could work with the seniors at the senior housing or at the teen center," Prue came back.

The project would be, in other words, a vehicle for the Sheriff's Department to foster a positive environment in the county. Both women are enthusiastic about their vision.

Kris Gaudiniere, a teacher and artist, met Sheila Prue on the playground. That is, when both were there with their children. "The thing that impressed me is just how unflappable she is — she's such a stable person. Nobody who knows Sheila

doesn't like her," Gaudiniere said. "She's very warm and genuine. No way is she a politician. She's not slick, she's got nothing up her sleeve, what you see is what you get. It's been very hard for her campaigning."

While Prue said clearly in several interviews that her being a lesbian wasn't and wouldn't be an issue in the election, she did allow this time that it might have been a factor in the decisions of her former primary opponents to run as an independent and as a write-in candidate. "Privately, I've heard that maybe they couldn't stand the thought of losing to a woman, much less a lesbian," she said.

Prue wouldn't comment on

Henry Farnum, the deputy hand-picked as successor to the retired sheriff. But she did mention a letter published in the Brattleboro *Reformer* the day before our interview. The letter was from Robyn Burke, whose partner Judith Hart Fournier had been murdered ten years ago by a former boyfriend. Burke reminded the community about the murder and wrote that Farnum had refused to enforce the restraining order the two women had obtained against Fournier's ex-boyfriend, contributing to Fournier's death. She questioned whether Farnum was the kind of sheriff residents wanted and urged readers to vote for Prue.

"Women's issues," Prue commented laconically, "are not a high priority at the Sheriff's office. The Sheriff's Department has been a haven for 'good ol' boys' for years."

Prue aims to change that. The department she'll lead has 52 members including civilian support staff, and about 40 vehicles. Ten county towns have contracts with the Sheriff's Department for law enforcement services, plus the Stratton Mountain resort. Her main task, she said, "will be building trust within the department and within the communities for the department."

Trust might not come easily. Ten days before the election, several current and former members of the department made public their complaints about Henry Farnum's leadership, charging Farnum with mismanagement and "creating a climate of fear and intimidation," according to a report in the *Reformer*.

Prue has no illusions about achieving instant rapport. "I'm sure there will be a faction of people who are not going to be happy with the fact that I've beaten Henry. And they'll do little things to try to undermine my leadership. My suspicion is that some [personnel] will want to leave. I plan to run the department differently. I want to establish an atmosphere that's friendlier, not screaming and yelling at staff."

Another goal for Prue is to have every officer trained in unarmed defense methods as well as raising the level of firearms training for officers to be the "best trained in the state."

Prue's officers will call her "Sheila," she said, not "chief" or "sheriff." She will carry a gun but will not wear a uniform most days in her new job. "Most sheriffs don't wear uniforms," she said, laughing when Kris chimed in with a wink, "But she does look good in a uniform."

Not only that, Kris added, "When Sheila is elected, we'll have a sheriff who can take up any budget shortages with bake sales."

But Prue herself had the last word: "I want to be the sheriff, not the lesbian sheriff. Brattleboro and Windham County are the best for letting people be themselves. I'm not a label — I'm myself." ▼

▼ Total number of elected county sheriffs nationwide: 3,088

▼ Total number of female elected county sheriffs nationwide as of Nov. 4: 27

▼ Total number of openly lesbian elected sheriffs nationwide: 2 —

Margo Frasier of Travis County, Texas (in office since 1997, covers 100,000 people, 726 square miles, with 1298 staff members); and Sheila Prue of Windham County, Vermont (takes office February 1, 2003, covers 43,000 people, 796 square miles, with 52 staff members).