

Moving in from the Margins

UVM's Dot Brauer Reports from the Creating Change Conference in Portland.

Dot Brauer, Coordinator of the University of Vermont's LGBTQ&A Services, attended the Creating Change Conference in Portland Oregon last month, in the company of several other Vermonters. Creating Change is an annual leadership conference for community activists organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). NGLTF defines itself as "the national progressive organization working for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people."

Portland was considered a good site for the conference because, "Since 1988, the communities of Oregon have faced over 30 ballot measure campaigns on gay-related issues, more campaigns than in any other jurisdiction in the United States."

According to a report on GayToday.com, the conference theme was Building an Anti-Racist Movement: Working for Social and Economic Justice. NGLTF's Director of the Creating Change Conference, Sue Hyde, said, "We are firmly committed to addressing the impact of racism in this country and in our movement, and so we dedicate this conference to the goal of bringing anti-racism front and center in the conference program and in our movement."

Featured speaker Carmen Vazquez, Director of Public Policy at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center of New York City said, "Creating Change is where I go to be with people who are trying to create the world we want to live in." She continued, "As we continue to struggle to defend civil liberties and civil rights and to create racial and economic justice in the midst of a war in the Middle East most Americans don't want, I need the solace of this progressive queer community, however fleeting, more than I ever have before. I think we all do."

Dot sent these dispatches back to Vermont from the conference.

Hi Folks,

Just wanted to write and let you know that I am reminded how invigorating it can be to be in the presence of many people who are doing important and difficult social change work. I have been thinking about how many college-age folks there are here and imagining our own students taking part in these conversations and workshops. I am excited about opportunities for education and cultural projects on our campus. I have met a couple of powerful educators on trans and intersex issues and someone who

works with college students on creating community murals, all this and it is just the first day!! ;^)

I hope staff and faculty on this list [a UVM diversity center email listserve] will find time to join lgbt students and our community of color in responding to the alarming views that will likely be expressed by [essayist] Dinesh D'Souza next Monday.

Hi Everyone,

I just came from a keynote by Lori L. Jean, Executive Director of the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force that was both inspiring and frightening. Inspiring because of the power and integrity of Lori Jean as a national level leader in social justice work. Her deep and enduring commitment to ending racism and to working for social and economic justice for all people in our country and throughout the world was not just parenthetical to her address, but was the central theme. At the same time that she spoke out intelligently and passionately against the war in Iraq, she explained the Bush administration's systematic and dangerous erosion of our civil rights.

She did not need to explain to the audience that had just given her a raucous standing ovation chanting "NGLTF: Stand Against the War!" that expressing criticism of our government has become grounds for detention by our government. She explained how the Patriot Act empowers our government to detain us, without having to charge us, without having to allow us to speak to our families or to an attorney, merely on the grounds that we "might" be somehow involved in activities counter to our government's interests. The law contains no time limit to these detentions, including the thousands of people who have already been detained.

There have been incidents where a U.S. citizen who made a profane gesture to the presidential motorcade was detained and questioned by members of the CIA for that expression of protest. A university student's room was searched and the student questioned because of a poster hanging on the student's wall.

While judges and editorials alike have spoken out about the abuses of power inherent in this legislation and in the idea of unilateral aggression against Iraq without immediate threat, the policy persists.

I found myself imagining how we will or can respond if leaders like Lori Jean or leaders at our local level were "disappeared" by our government for their outspoken criticisms

of Bush administration policy and I thought about the lessons we all thought we learned in the aftermath of the McCarthy "witch hunts."

Lori Jean finished her address admitting that there are no simple answers to the current situation or for responding to Tuesday's elections. But she called on everyone in the room to dramatically increase our efforts to organize and build coalitions at the grassroots level so that we are prepared to work against these erosions of our rights through the legislative process. I am passing along her message.

Hi Everyone,

I have returned from my travels. The 6 days I spent in Arizona after the 4-day Creating Change conference in Portland were a welcome shot of sunshine. I did not know that the sun shines an average of 300 days a year in Phoenix. Hmmm ...

Anyway, while I was there I was reading some of the books I purchased while in Portland. If you haven't yet come across *The No-Nonsense Guide To Sexual Diversity* by Vanessa Baird, you might want to take a look. Baird succeeds at providing an overview that is current, responsible, balanced and concise, all in 130 little pages.

I have indeed returned to Vermont recharged. The anti-racism theme of this year's Creating Change conference reminded me that there is more that I could be doing as an individual and it helped me realize some of the things we can do as a community. I left reminding myself that anti-racism work is not just about making our community a place where lgbt people who are also people of color feel fully included. It is also actively work to end racism throughout the larger community and its institutions. I realized that for myself it will also be about reaching out and teaching people of color in my communities more about lgbt issues.

I have also returned mulling over what it will take to bring a handful of the trans activists I met to our town for some kind of educational gathering. I have returned dreaming of a student-painted mural honoring lgbt heroes, past and present. I got the information necessary to get UVM included in the new national project to survey lgbt students and faculty about climate issues on campus. I brought back scholarly papers on the crisis in the Catholic Church and anti-war stickers that say "... well let's just say a clever, but risqué slogan that is critical of the Bush-Cheney administration.

The most valuable thing I brought back and the thing I will feel most challenged to share was the experience of meeting courageous, intelligent, creative, strong activists from all over the country. I want to spread around my feeling of excitement at talking with people who are working for lgbt legal protections in Kentucky. I want to share my experience of spending a full day in discussion with over three-dozen trans people from all over the country as they discussed their politics and their realities. I want to share the feeling of respect I had for the power of our movement at the presentation of the results of a Human Rights Campaign poll on the public's feelings about transgendered people.

The last workshop I attended was called "The Jewish Thing." After days of talking about race and trans oppression, and a keynote session that was very anti-war, about 40 people gathered to witness the silence that had existed throughout the conference regarding a Jewish perspective. I was reminded that something like anti-war enthusiasm, that seems complicated [enough] without thinking about a Jewish or Israeli perspective is infinitely more so [when that perspective is included]. I left feeling committed to being more sensitive about not cutting off discussion of dangerous and complex tensions in the Middle East. Participants in the workshop talked about the same kinds of "divided" feelings of identity and only partial acceptance that non-white lgbt people describe.

The simple idea that the oppression of any of us oppresses all of us makes infinite sense in the abstract, but the truth is that most of us find the hurts and pains we are most intimately familiar with the most compelling. I was reminded again how many injustices, large and small, won't come to my attention unless I choose to bring my attention to them.

I also know that most of us reach points every so often, in the process of discovery about the oppression of others, where our cup runneth over all over the floor. Complexity is after all one of the leading causes of headaches. I find though that if I space out my new awarenesses with a good night's sleep, some playtime or a weekend off to refresh, I have less trouble being present to the painful and difficult experiences of other people.

As I reread this note, I'm aware that in compressing my learning from 4 days into one helping, I may be running your oppression cup over. So I want to end by saying what I said at the end of the Awards Ceremony last April.

I'm proud to work for, with and on behalf of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community, because we are an amazing bunch.

- Dot

left: Organizers from across the country convene for the Reflections on Building an Anti-Racist Movement panel; right: Lori L. Jean takes the mic.

