

Lesbian Sherriff Wins Recount, Owes Taxes

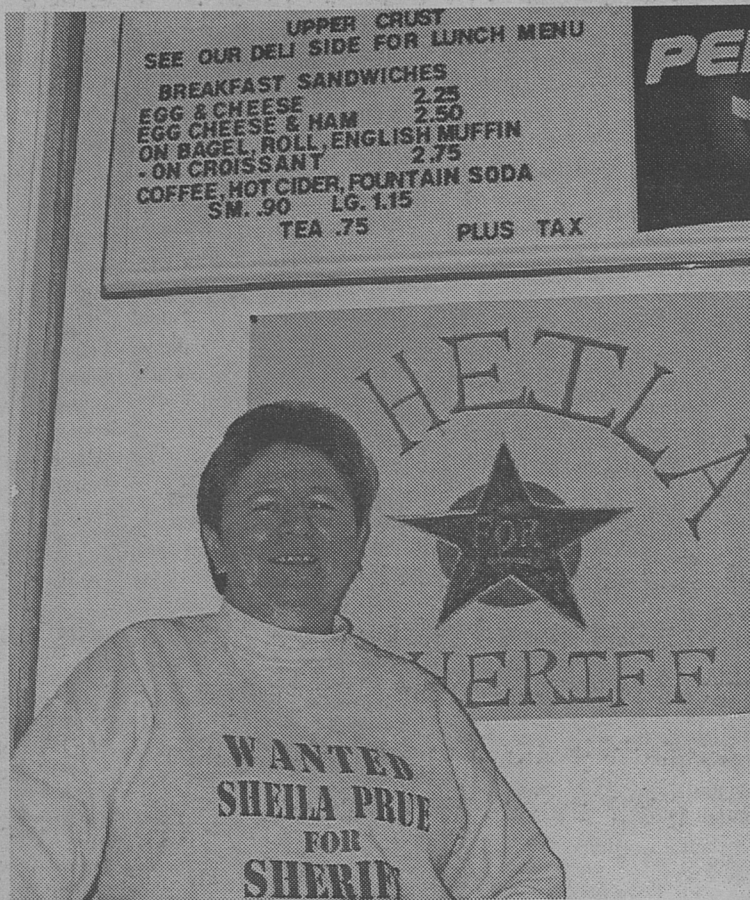
BY PAUL OLSEN

Southern Vermont voters made history in November when they elected Sheila Prue the new Sheriff of Windham County, but they may be having second thoughts. As we've reported, Prue, a Democrat, will become the nation's second openly lesbian sheriff when she takes office early next year.

Prue and her partner of eight years, Kris Gaudinier, jointly ran the Upper Crust Bakery in Brattleboro until Prue won her election. That business is one source of recent controversy over the disclosure that Prue owed significant sums in taxes to both the town and the state. She recently paid \$3,676 in back property taxes, interest, fines, and utilities on her home to the town of Brattleboro. At press time Prue owed an additional \$9,000 in delinquent property, rooms and meals, and withholding taxes to the town and to the state of Vermont. According to a report in the Barre-Montpelier *Times Argus*, Prue and Gaudinier at press time were still in arrears on their property taxes for 2002. The disclosure of the tax arrears was reported in the *Rutland Herald*, the *Times Argus*, and other newspapers.

The *Rutland Herald* also reported that Prue declared personal bankruptcy ten years ago and is trying to sell the Upper Crust Bakery.

The budget for the Sheriff's



Department comes from three major sources: the Windham County budget, state funds, and private contracts.

The tax controversy, Prue told the *Rutland Herald*, would not adversely impact her job. "I'm confident in my ability to manage the budget," she said. "The people of

Windham County will be pleased with my performance. Any taxes I owe will be taken care of in the [bakery] sale."

Prue defeated incumbent Republican Henry Farnum by 298 votes on November 5. Farnum challenged the outcome and called for a

recount. The recount gave Prue an additional 92 votes, increasing her margin of victory to 382 votes, while Farnum also picked up eight votes. "It wasn't in the cards, was it?" Farnum was quoted in *The Advocate*, a national gay newsmagazine, after the recount was completed. In the revised count, Prue received 7,562 votes to Farnum's 7,180 votes, according to County Court Clerk Lawrence Robinson.

Sheriff-elect Prue's four-year term begins February 1, 2003 and she will earn \$55,000 annually.

According to *The Advocate*, Farnum invited Prue to the department's staff meeting in early December to answer people's questions. "I'm sheriff until February 1, 2003," he said. In a statement that did not bode well for communications during the transition, Farnum was quoted as saying, "I don't think she has any questions. It appears to me she knows it all, and you can quote me."

The election of a lesbian sheriff has attracted national attention. In a recent interview in *The Advocate*, Prue says her sexual orientation will not adversely impact her role as the leader of Windham County's 55-person Sheriff Department. "I suspect there may be some grumbling, but I don't anticipate any major problems that we won't be able to deal with together," she said. ▼

Paul Olsen also writes for *In Newsweekly*

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Pride Agenda about the Senator's amendment to add language protecting "gender identity or expression." The Pride Agenda warned that the effort threatened to derail the bill completely, at least for 2002.

As several busloads of activists — those supporting the Pride Agenda and others insisting that the measure should still be broadened to protect transgender individuals — descended on Albany December 17, the outcome of the vote was not yet clear, a reality that Foreman readily acknowledged. Nor had the tensions between Senator Duane and the Pride Agenda cooled.

Duane insisted on raising his amendment, and in his floor speech discussed the history of the gay rights effort, offering both praise and criticism — which one gender rights advocate termed "vituperative" — for the Pride Agenda's efforts. The amendment received no formal vote, but in an informal tally known as a "canvass of agreement," garnered the support of only 19 senators out of 61.

Despite the raw emotions laid bare by the final few weeks leading up to the victory, the mood changed quickly once the final vote handing gay rights advocates their long-sought victory was completed. Duane and his lesbian and gay colleagues in the Assembly, Deborah Glick and Daniel O'Donnell, joined Foreman, former Pride Agenda executive director Dick Dadey, and other leading advocates in hugs and even some tears.

Later, at a press conference held in the Minority Leader's office, Paterson and Duane were joined by Foreman, who won the loudest ovation from the crowd of activists on hand. ▼

Andy Humm's reporting contributed to this story. Paul Schindler is the editor in chief of *Gay City News*, the weekly LGBT newspaper in New York City.

Gays and Lesbians Give \$200K to Vermont Democrats

In the November 2002 election, Democratic Party candidates benefited to the tune of over \$200,000 from gay and lesbian donors, according to Party sources. That amount was less than the amount received in the hotly contested "backlash" election of 2000.

According to Vermont Democratic Party Executive Director Mark Michaud, \$100,000 was raised from out-of-state gay and lesbian donors with an interest in ensuring that the civil union law would not be substantively undermined or repealed.

Another \$100,000-plus was

funneled to candidates through Vermonters for Civil Unions and the Vermont Fund for Families, said VCU co-founder Beth Robinson. Not all of that money came from the gay and lesbian community, but also from straight allies. Most of the VCU and VFF funds went to Democrats, some to Progressives, "a little" to Republican candidates, depending on their records and commitment to supporting the current civil union legislation.

Nationally, other issues than civil unions were predominant, and national gay and lesbian political action

committees were more focused on gay rights ballot initiatives. "The perception was that the civil unions fight had been fought and won in 2000," said Michaud.

The Human Rights Campaign placed a field organizer in Vermont to assist in legislative campaigns in Rutland and Bennington counties. The Democrats picked up three seats in Rutland County and one in Bennington.

The Vermont Democratic Party "acknowledges and is grateful for gay and lesbian support in this election," said Michaud. "It was critical to

our gains in legislative races and a testament to the fact that financial resources are important. The number of volunteers from the gay and lesbian community who worked as volunteers was equally critical.

"It took thousands of volunteer hours to complete literature drops and other campaign tasks for the legislative candidates," Michaud added. "In the past two elections, the people in the gay and lesbian community or those from outside the community who are energized by civil unions made up a solid component of the volunteer effort, as important as the money donated." ▼

St. J. Needle Exchange Still Awaiting OK

At press time, the Vermont Cares St. Johnsbury needle exchange program was still in limbo, awaiting final word from Vermont Health Commissioner Dr. Jan Carney as to under what conditions the program could continue. Carney had said in October that she would issue a final ruling on the permit at the end of November.

Carney told the *Caledonian Record* that she would wait for recommendations from the town health committee headed by Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital CEO Paul Bengtson before deciding whether to lift the restrictions on the needle exchange program or rescind the permit granted to Vermont CARES.

The Selectboard, at the reported prompting of Darlene Ahrens of the Vermont Department of Health, came up with a list of demands and conditions they were to have presented to Vermont Cares and to Commissioner Carney, based on the recommendations of the Community Health Committee.

The *Caledonian Record* reported that

the conditions include: giving decision-making authority to the community advisory board, developing a method for evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, making the program mobile through the use of outreach workers, creating written guidelines for assessing how many needles to give to a client during a visit and establishing a connection to Tri-County Substance Abuse Services to help with treatment referrals.

"If the program is going to be in the community, this is how we want it," Town Manager Mike Welch told the *Caledonian Record*. "If they can't meet that, they may not be who is appropriate to run it."

The controversy arose when members of the St. Johnsbury Selectboard objected to the opening and operation of the program in their town, allegedly without their input. Vermont Cares had held a community forum on the program, and said that most of the input had been positive. In early December, 2002, VT Cares officials met with the Selectboard's Community Health Committee, agency representatives, and

members of the public.

According to a document provided to OITM by Vermont Cares Director Kendall Farrell, the organization feels it has more than met the permit's requirement for public input since October. Meetings and public events it has organized or participated in include: an October 28 St. Johnsbury Selectboard meeting; distribution of informational handouts at the polling place in St. Johnsbury on November 5; an informational presentation at the St. Johnsbury chapter of the Business and Professional Women's Organization on Nov. 6; the regular monthly Needle Exchange Community Advisory Board on Nov. 6; presentation at the Northern Vermont Regional Hospital Community Relations Committee Nov. 11; informational presentations at the Kiwanis Club on Nov. 11 and the South Congregational Church on Nov. 17; presentation at the Parent-Teachers Group of the St. Johnsbury School Board Nov. 20; a public forum on needle exchange in St. Johnsbury on December 4.

Vermont CARES has had an office in

St. Johnsbury since 1996 to serve Orleans, Essex and Caledonia counties. The needle exchange program began in August of 2002. In early October, Commissioner Carney restricted the program temporarily to serving only the nine IV drug users who were already enrolled. Since then, four other potential clients have been turned away, although more might have stayed away because of publicity over the program's restriction.

The program aims to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS through sharing of needles by intravenous drug users. It offers to exchange used needles for clean needles and provides bleach kits, prevention education, and treatment referrals.

According to a report in the *Caledonian Record*, seven of the nine clients in the program were from Caledonia County, one from Orleans County and one from New Hampshire. Before the program, all but one had shared a needle with another person.

When asked whether the change in administration in Montpelier might have an effect on the program's permit, Farrell said, "I hope not. It's a state law that the needle exchange programs should exist." ▼