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HAPPY GAY VALENTINE'S DAY?

Burlington Not Quite Barren for Romantic Queers

BY FRAN MORAVCSIK

A red-trimmed rack in the chain book and music store on Church Street in downtown Burlington held the first valentines to catch my eye this season. I went over to browse, picking up one showing two women on bicycles. But when I opened it the kicker was, "If I have a good date, you're on your own." I shoved that one back. Of the hundred cards on display, eight were labeled for family, six showed heterosexual couples, five showed female pairs (with a friendship valentine motif), none showed two men, and 23 featured animals, a direction we will not pursue.

As my errands carried me southward on Church Street, I kept an eye out for more possibilities. Candy stores had no cards yet, though they earnestly promised some would be out for this,

the only chocolate holiday between Christmas and Easter. The craft stores and City Market feature artistic renditions of rural Vermont, a comfortable distance from humans and any of their messy emotions.

This wholesome-ness drove me to the opposite extreme, and I ducked into Burlington City Center to check

out a store that looks porny though the chain is listed as a youth-oriented business. The woman with the pierced nose and

leather fedora asked, "Cards? What kind of cards? We got playing cards." No greeting cards, but she recommended a large down-

town drug store as having the best selection in the area.

Of course! I went down Cherry Street and indeed found a long rack just inside the door, about five hundred different valentines, meticulously labeled as to style and designated recipient. About three-fourths were for relatives, from nuclear-close to the far-

"son and wife" I recognized another category missing from this heterosexual array: "child and longtime companion." I bet that would sell well to the PFLAG people.

The rest of the drugstore valentines, those for lovers, were divided into religious, humorous, and romantic. The first seemed a non-starter. Humorous valentines are fun to read off the rack, but tricky to send. Jokes suitable for straight couples don't often resonate with our kind. The romantic ones, now those are the classic item. The pronouns "you" and "me" do not reveal gender, at least in English, and the sentiments can apply to anyone in love.

I must admit I did not read past the first page of flowing script on the wordier cards, but most of them seemed valid enough for all sorts. Even among the five

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Most of the valentines were for relatives, from nuclear-close to the farthest twig of the family tree. No gays, no lesbians (no surprise) in this mainstream store.

Barre Sexual & Domestic Violence Shelter Admits Men

BY EUAN BEAR

The first shelter in Vermont and possibly in the nation to house both male and female victims of sexual and domestic violence has opened in Barre. The shelter is operating as a program of the Sexual Assault Crisis Team of Washington County.

The shelter, on Cottage Street in Barre in the same building as the SACT office, is set up with two separate living areas, so that if there are both male and female residents, they need not cross paths, according to Executive Director Bobbi Gagne.

The shelter's governing group decided not to keep the location a secret, but instead to cultivate positive and watchful relationships with neighbors, the police, and local mental health agencies, according to Crisis Team Board President and shelter resident Keith Goslant.

"We have seen between 50 and 60 male victims of sexual violence in a year," said Gagne, adding that it was clearly time for there to be shelter services for male as well as female victims. "At this point, we're inventing the wheel," she said of the groundbreaking service.

The shelter is for adults. Male victims

of sexual violence (including adult rape and past childhood sexual abuse) gain access to the Crisis Team's services – including peer support, referrals, and the shelter – the same way female victims do, said Gagne. People who need shelter or other services can call the SACT's hotline or the office.

Male victims of domestic violence, however, need to be referred through another agency – such as SafeSpace or another domestic violence group – to ensure that the person seeking help is not an abuser in search of a sheltered partner.

"We have limited space, and we're getting calls from all over," said Gagne. The shelter's screening criteria are pretty much what you'd expect: the person has to be non-suicidal, able to stay on his or her own (that is, not have mental health or medical concerns requiring constant monitoring), and must not have sexually offended. These criteria apply to both men and women. The maximum stay is 3 nights.

According to Gagne, the group is providing services to male victims with an all-volunteer staff because no one will fund them, although funding for services to female victims of domestic violence and sexual assault is available. "Our services are available to human beings," she said. "For the last ten years we've seen more and more male



SACT executive director Bobbi Gagne

"It did not make sense not to extend help to all human beings."

victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault come through [the Crisis Team's] doors. As a Native American Indian person, it did not make sense not to extend help to all human beings."

Because of the volunteer staffing at the shelter and for peer support groups, Gagne says, "what I give for male victims is not taking away from female victims."

She continues, "We might meet them a little more than halfway, simply because males have so few sexual violence resources. Men, for example, are more likely to come to the shelter at night – or outside their working hours – because they don't feel okay about explaining their need for shelter to a boss."

The volunteers are so committed, she said, that they sometimes even buy out of their own pockets copies of the few books on male victimization that are available to give to male residents to take with them.

The Sexual Assault Crisis Team has both men and women on its Board of Directors and as advocates and volunteers. Keith Goslant is both President of the Board and the volunteer "house parent" at the shelter. "We want to make sure," said Gagne, "that any male victim coming through these doors doesn't feel that 'this is just a feminist organization, men are not welcome here.'"

Goslant was the perfect candidate to oversee the shelter, Gagne explained, because he has spent at least eight years with the Crisis Team as a volunteer, eventually becoming the Board's president. "Because of his work in the field and with various populations of different genders, he could support male victims – and," she laughs a bit grimly, "he was willing to do it for no pay."

The Crisis Team has only five to seven advocate-volunteers to cover all the shelter's hours, according to Gagne. The group is always looking for volunteers, who will receive 30 hours of training.

An open house will be scheduled later in the Spring. ▼

To volunteer for the Crisis Team or at the Shelter, call 802-476-1388. Anyone in need of shelter or sexual violence support and advocacy services should call 802-479-5577.

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