

# Visibility Day Nets Visit With Gov. Douglas

By PAUL OLSEN

Organizations representing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Vermonters came to the state's capitol on January 31 to meet with Governor James Douglas and Lieutenant Governor Brian Dubie as part of Visibility Day at the Vermont Statehouse.

Sponsored by Equality Vermont, a statewide advocacy group, Visibility Day is designed to give members of the state's glbt community an opportunity to meet their elected representatives and discuss issues of concern in the current legislative session.

"It is important for the organizations within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community to be here to help educate legislators about what the organizations do and to put a face to the organizations," Virginia Renfrew, a representative of Equality Vermont, told *Out in the Mountains*. "It provides legislators with an opportunity to see who we are and learn about our organizations."

Groups participating in Visibility Day included Outright Vermont, a gay youth support group; Mountain Pride Media, publishers of Vermont's gay monthly newspaper; SafeSpace, a domestic violence prevention group; G-Learn, an organization for teachers and students; the Rainbow Library, promoting glbtq diversity in books for young children; Pride Vermont, the organizing group for the annual Pride Festival; and R.U.I.2?, a Burlington-based community center.

In a brief meeting with Governor Douglas (R) and Lt. Governor Dubie (R) in the Governor's ceremonial office, Outright Vermont's Executive Director, B.J. Rogers, was

given the floor to discuss the importance of safe schools for gay and lesbian youth. "We all have concerns that students have access to safe and non-hostile environments," he said. "If a student doesn't feel safe in school it is particularly hard for them to get an education. The condition in Vermont schools depends on where you are."

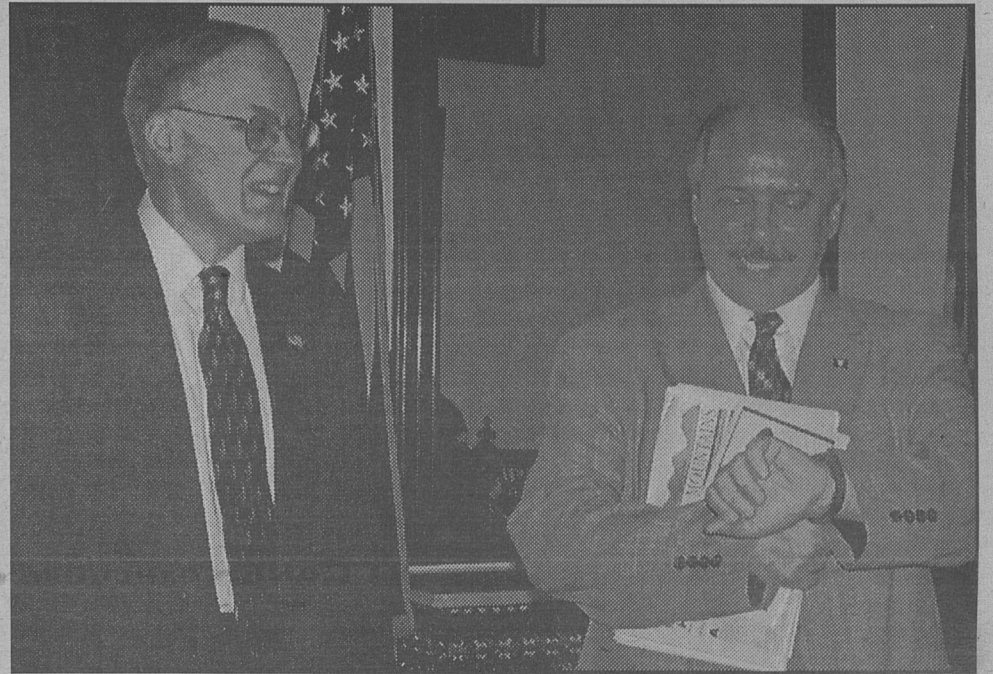
Three other members of the delegation spoke about their own alienating experiences as gay or lesbian youth in Vermont schools within the past 10 to 15 years.

Douglas told Visibility Day participants that he is committed to schools free from harassment. "What I am really concerned about that you have mentioned today is safety in the schools," he said. "It is very important that every young person get the opportunity to succeed. The whole thrust of the new federal law is 'no child shall be left behind.' I want to be sure that every young Vermonter has the opportunity to learn in safety and maximize his or her potential."

Douglas went so far as to suggest that Rogers' description of the type of student who was likely to be harassed because of a perception that he might be gay would have described him in high school. However, the governor prefaced his remarks with a tight-budget caveat, indicating that he is unwilling to spend money on any potential solutions to school safety for glbtq youth.

In an effort to learn more, Douglas also agreed to a future meeting with gay and lesbian youth.

Christopher Kaufman, Executive Director of R.U.I.2?, was pleased with the meeting with Governor Douglas. "I felt like the meeting was very successful at presenting the



Gov Jim Douglas (left) confers with Keith Goslant during their Visibility Day meeting.

issue of safe schools," he said. Gov. Douglas "seemed very receptive and seemed to understand how difficult it is to be a youth in Vermont schools. He seemed to get it. Whether he will do anything is what we need to stay on top of."

In an interview following the meeting with Visibility Day participants, Lt. Governor Brian Dubie told *OITM* that he did not expect the issues of civil unions to be raised during the current legislative session. "It is not something I have heard from constituents and it is not

something I have heard from people in the Statehouse," he said. "The laser beam of the legislative agenda is jobs. I haven't had any discussion on that issue."

Equality Vermont, formerly known as the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, began the Visibility Day tradition in 1995. The group's mission is "to promote civil rights, personal empowerment and social acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Vermonters." ▼

## Gill Grants \$15K to Straight Org. for LGBTQ Training

A Massachusetts-based organization with a Charlotte satellite office, the New England Network, has received \$15,000 from the Gill Foundation, a major gay and lesbian funder. The group won the funding to work with organizations serving glbtq youth. While the grant is apparently a continuation of a previous one, this is the first year the organization listed a Vermont address.

The listing was unusual because in a small state like Vermont, most of the glbtq organizations are well known, while this organization was virtually unknown.

The New England Network is a private, nonprofit training and networking center for "over 100 public and private child, youth and family service agencies throughout the region," according to its website. Its primary office is in Boxboro, Massachusetts, just off Interstate 495 west-northwest of Boston. When its co-director moved to Vermont, Charlotte became a satellite office.

The grant from the Gill Foundation pays the New England Network \$15,000 to assess participating youth service agencies on how well – or how badly – they serve glbtq youth. Following the assessment is an assessment review, some training workshops, and "technical assistance" in implementing

the recommendations.

The assessments of the eight participating agencies – three in Maine, two in New Hampshire, and three in Vermont – have been completed. Last fall, an assessment review and basic workshop training was held in Portland, Maine. Now the Network is in the "technical assistance" phase. The project director, Jane Stapleton, agreed that "none of these organizations' work normally targets glbtq youth."

Asked why a major gay and lesbian foundation is giving money to a straight organization to teach other straight organizations how to better serve gay and lesbian youth, Stapleton responded that seven of the 10 members of the assessment and training team were gay or lesbian.

This project, Stapleton insisted, was "intentional" in connecting with an Outright organization in each of the three states to enlist their help in assessing and training the participants' staff. The training money actually paid to Outright for their help, however, was minimal, according to both Stapleton and Outright Vermont Executive Director B.J. Rogers.

Among the project's findings: few of the programs had nondiscrimination policies for staff; only one agency offered domestic partnership benefits; despite typical-

ly high staff turnover rates, organizations only rarely and intermittently offered optional staff training on issues of concern to glbtq youth; and few agencies made their service areas (intake, reception, or residence) visually welcoming or accepting to glbtq youth.

Burlington's Lund Family Center was one of three Vermont agencies to participate in the assessment phase of the New England Network project. The other two were Community Action Youth Services in Newport and Youth Services of Windham County, based in Brattleboro.

According to Kim Cyr, supervisor of the residential program at the Lund Family Center, the assessment took them aback. "We thought we were doing a fairly good job on glbtq issues. We didn't realize there were that many areas where we need to improve."

The Lund Family center began as the Lund Home, a residence for young, pregnant unmarried women. At first glance most people would assume as a matter of course that any agency dealing with pregnant girls has a heterosexual clientele, and wonder why the staff would even need diversity training on glbtq issues.

Both Cyr and Executive Director Barbara Rachelson agreed that the agency serves girls who may

identify as lesbian, bisexual, or questioning. Young women might get pregnant as a result of trying out – or resisting – a new sexual identity, or were pressured into sex without birth control, or were raped. In addition, the agency provides services for the dads, whose sexual identities may also fall almost anywhere on a continuum from gay to questioning to straight to trans.

The Lund Center did not send anyone to the post-assessment review and training, Rachelson and Cyr said, because "it was so expensive." During a phone interview Cyr had difficulty wading through the assessment report's bureaucratic language to give specific examples of recommendations. Two were finally identified: there were no glbtq-oriented magazines or posters in the residence area lobby or hallway; and specific inclusive language needed to be added to materials for staff and clients. It's not enough to say 'Everyone is welcome and respected here,' Cyr agreed, without saying specifically that 'everyone' includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

Cyr said there are few, if any, magazines or posters of any kind anywhere, and Rachelson responded welcomingly to a suggestion that the center could receive copies of *OITM* for clients and staff and to help create a more visually

welcoming environment.

Cyr also emphasized that the agency had on its own asked Outright to conduct trainings for staff prior to the New England Network assessment. Further, Rachelson said, the Lund Family Center is the largest adoption agency in Vermont, and it makes a point of being welcoming to gay and lesbian adoptive parents.

Outright's B.J. Rogers participated in the assessment review and training session in Portland. "These folks are committed to connecting agencies with local resources," he said. "Of course, what they're doing is what we attempt to do every day. But we don't have the capacity, the funding, the staff to solicit agencies and create an assessment tool with a follow-up process."

Rogers said he felt the New England Network project has been "thoughtful and fairly considerate in trying to gather information to educate themselves on our issues." However, he concluded, "I find it equally disturbing and encouraging that non-lgbtq organizations are doing this work. Without allies, the work would not move forward. I think they are genuinely interested in getting their member organizations to be safer and more sensitive to glbtq populations." ▼