

Trans Conference Lays Foundation for Equality

The University of Vermont is breaking new ground for the state in hosting its first regional conference to focus on transgender identity and acceptance on April 12. The conference is called "Translating Identity" and is open to members of the university community and the public.

"This year our focus has been on trans issues," said Free to Be President Caitlin Daniel-McCarter. "We've been active in other trans events, such as the Day of Remembrance and other [out of state] conferences. We decided it was time we tried to reach more of the community here."

The conference will focus on several aspects of identity, including the acceptability of queer, transgender, fat, and disabled people in various segments of society.

As a Student Government-sponsored club, Free to Be is funded through Student Activity funds. But for the conference, the group decided to seek an endorsement from UVM President Daniel M. Fogel. The President was "willing and able to work with us," said Daniel-McCarter. "In fact he seemed excited that we came to him to talk to him about the proposal." Daniel-McCarter added that Fogel would be attending the conference with his wife. He is also listed as a co-sponsor.

The conference will feature author and editor Riki Wilchins as the keynote speaker. "We wanted a 'big name' trans person in order to draw as many community members from beyond the university as possible," said Daniel-McCarter. "Kate Bornstein was out of the question, money-wise, so we called up GenderPAC and asked

if we could get Riki for the 12th."

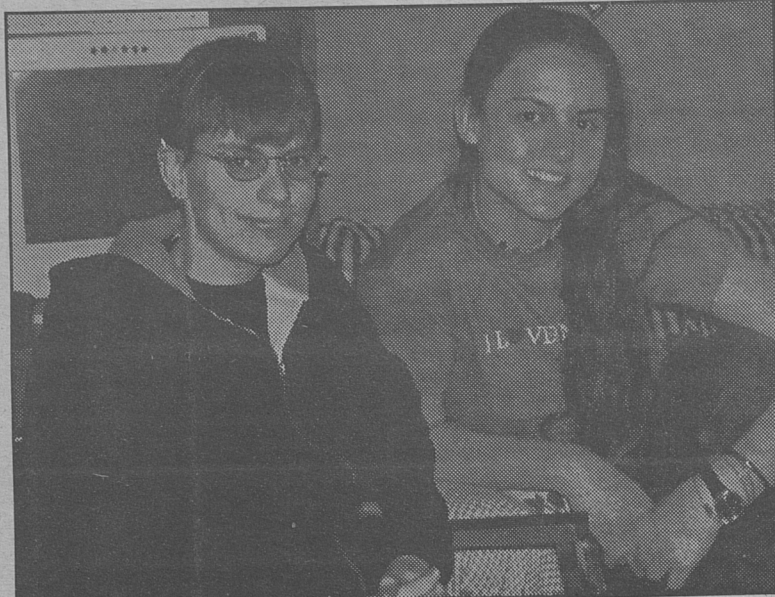
Wilchins is the executive director of Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC), and the author of *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion & the End of Gender* (Firebrand, 1997). She co-edited the anthology *Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Binary*.

According to Wilchins, writing in a column in the January 2003 *Advocate*, "... gender is where people learn to hate us. Boys learn early they'll be attacked or punished if they don't grit their teeth like Clint Eastwood and hulk around like Vin Diesel. They learn to hate anything in themselves that might be considered unmanly. ... No wonder crimes against effeminate gay men and transgendered women are so violent and personal."

Also participating will be Eli Clare, a disability activist who recently moved to Vermont, and Ethan Fechter-Leggett, a junior at the university and co-coordinator of the conference. Clare is the author of *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*.

Fechter-Leggett is a mid-transition transman and member of the junior class who has, he said, experienced blatant job and social discrimination, including the refusal of UVM professors to address him as a male. "There's a lot lacking still. More professors will step up and confront someone saying 'faggot' as anti-gay. Not very many will address transgender students - including me - and use the correct, changed pronouns," said Fechter-Leggett.

Daniel-McCarter cited recent murders and rapes of transgender people across the country and a



Trans activist Ethan Fletcher-Leggett with Free to Be President Caitlin Daniel-McCarter

"scary" interaction in her home neighborhood in Chicago as one motivation behind a conference to promote understanding. Daniel-McCarter (who identifies as a "straight queer") and Fechter-Leggett are dating, and the two had stopped in a convenience store to buy yogurt. "These two guys came in, and they had been watching us for a few minutes. And they got right up in our faces and screamed at us but to each other 'Is this a bitch and a dude or two bitches?' If it hadn't been for an older woman who started yelling at them and distracted their attention, it might have really escalated."

"And there would have been a very different, maybe tragic ending," added Fechter-Leggett.

Daniel-McCarter suggested that people who are easily classifiable

as either male or female are less likely to be harassed over gender issues than those who occupy some middle ground. "It's like the fact that they couldn't tell whether Ethan was male or female enraged them or made them more afraid than if we were two women walking around holding hands."

At least one "fully transitioned" female-to-male transgender student at UVM, Daniel-McCarter said, experiences harassment from students, especially in bathrooms, but also in classrooms and with professors. "This university rocks, but there's definitely a few things that could be better."

The conference aims to clarify identity issues, look at the construction of gender, identify sources of prejudice, and encourage openness.

"Among my lesbian friends, they think that identifying as trans is a way to defy queerness, to fall back into a heterosexual identity. And besides," said Daniel-McCarter, "no one who grew up with male privilege and benefits can ever be a woman to them, they say. Not to mention why anyone would want to be 'one of them.'"

"And in the straight world," she continued, "well, my sister is a lesbian, and my Dad understands that and is very supportive. But he doesn't understand my dating Ethan, or how a person can be a male without a penis."

Above all else, Daniel-McCarter wrote in a response to emailed questions, "just this one day of exposure to the issues that transpeople face will be a milestone for our community. It will certainly make us all think a little harder and will hopefully lead to progress for trans inclusion and acceptance within the community."

Free to Be, the Translating Identity conference sponsoring organization, has 20 "solid members," according to Fechter-Leggett, the group's secretary, "which is a lot more than we've had before, in at least three years." The group often works in concert with the university's GLBTQA Diversity Center, whose director, Dot Brauer, will also conduct a workshop at the conference.

The conference venue is limited to 215 people. Registration is required, although the event is free. ▼

For more information or to register for the conference, check the website www.uvm.edu/~free2b, email free2b@zoo.uvm.edu, or call 802-656-0699.

Miss. Judge Orders Birth Certificate

At press time, a Mississippi judge had just ordered the state to issue a birth certificate for a 5-year-old boy born in Mississippi and adopted by a lesbian couple from Vermont. Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund filed a lawsuit against the state in 2001 for refusing to issue a birth certificate listing Holly Perdue and Cherie Goldstein as the child's two parents, leaving him without any legal documentation of his name, the

names of his parents or the date and place of his birth

"This is a very significant victory," said Greg Nevins, the staff attorney in Lambda Legal's Atlanta-based Southern Regional Office who handled the case. "This child was punished because his parents are gay. A birth certificate is a basic and important document, and today's ruling means this young boy should finally have his."

Goldstein and Perdue took their son into their Vermont home eight days after he was born. In April 2000, the adoption was finalized in Vermont and the two women asked Mississippi to amend the child's birth certificate to include his adoptive parents' names and his new name.

The Mississippi Board of Health repeatedly denied their requests because the child's parents are lesbians.

In a lawsuit filed in state court, Lambda Legal argued that the state was in violation of its own law requiring officials to honor valid out-of-state adoptions and provide amended birth certificates.

The ruling comes just a week after a New Jersey court ordered that state to list both lesbian mothers on the birth certificate of a child they intend to raise together. "All across the country - from the Northeast to the Deep South -

courts are increasingly recognizing that children with gay parents are entitled to the same protections as every other child," Nevins said. "Today's ruling is an important milestone in this trend."

Goldstein and Perdue live in central Vermont with their son and other adoptive children. "We have been fighting the battle with Mississippi for 6 years now - trying to get his birth certificate to read the names of both of his parents," they wrote. "Today we win!" ▼

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