

To Be or Not to Be Out: A National Guard Soldier's Inside View of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

By E. LYNNE LEMONT

She joined the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) in high school. Having grown up in an army family in another state, it seemed like the right thing to do. Now she's in Vermont, training with the Green Mountain Boys, and right in the thick of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.' She agreed to an interview with *OITM* on condition that her identity be kept confidential, so we'll call her "Lois Marshall."

"I've put in four years and I've got two to go," Lois said. "My home unit is in another state, and if they were to get orders to go to Kuwait or Iraq, I'd have an option not to go because I've got school to finish. But if my girls were shipped out, they wouldn't go without me. I'd go."

Lois said she's been out as a bisexual woman since she was 15. She even took another woman to the JROTC ball in high school. "In the Guard, they know" about her bisexuality, "but they don't officially know. I'm not the only one," she continued. "Some of the members of my home unit go home at night to their same-sex partners."

But here in Vermont, she said, "they don't know at all." Lois isn't sure it would make much difference to the men she trains with: "The men [in the Guard] here are only threatened by [gay] men." But, she added, "If they're trying to get you out for something else they'll use [sexual] orientation. The word

'dyke' doesn't get people killed. The word 'fagot' does."

She's referring to gay-bashing on U.S. army bases, including the murder of PFC Barry Winchell by a baseball bat-wielding fellow soldier at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

President Bush re-nominated Major General Robert T. Clark, that base's former commanding general, to Lieutenant General, the Army's second highest rank, despite concerns about his handling of anti-gay harassment among soldiers under his command.

"A friend of mine in the Army came out to his C.O. [Commanding Officer], and they rushed his processing through on a psych discharge for his own safety," Lois related. "It's not a dishonorable discharge, it's usually for something else, like a medical or psychiatric discharge code, a sideways way of discharging gay people."

In its report, *Conduct Unbecoming*, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network quotes a soldier whose Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) instructed his unit, during hand grenade training, to visualize "blowing up a gay bar." The same soldier told SLDN he heard NCOs tell soldiers that "the only way to decrease our nuclear arsenal is to put all fags on an island and nuke it."

The Army, Lois stated flatly, "makes no distinction between being a lesbian and being bisexual. All you can be is straight – single or married – but straight or gay, period."

Because she's no longer in the ROTC, she does not receive the scholarships

available through that program. She does receive a monthly paycheck from the National Guard and what she described as a "minuscule" discount from UVM – about \$200 per year, she said – on her tuition because of her military service.

"Once you sign up for the Army, you sign away your First Amendment rights. I don't feel I should have to hide anything," Lois explained, "but my C.O. is in the same boat I am." She said her immediate commanding officer in her home unit is a lesbian, though, of course, not officially. And, Lois said, if she were to come out as bisexual (to the Army that would be tantamount to identifying as a lesbian), it would bring unwelcome attention to her home unit and her commanding officer.

According to a report by the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military of the University of California at Santa Barbara, lesbians in the military are much more likely to be expelled than gay men. In 1999, almost a third of the 1,046 American military members discharged because of their sexual orientation were women, although they made up only 14 percent of the active armed forces.

SLDN estimates thousands, if not tens of thousands, of lesbian, gay and bisexual troops are serving in the current Middle East conflict. Gays and lesbians are excluded from a formal "Stop Loss" order preventing the discharge of soldiers, sailors, and airmen, but the rates of discharge have decreased substantially in 2002 and 2003 compared to previous years.

Regarding the current war in Iraq,

Lois said, "I've got a 'get out of jail free' card because I'm in school," and declared that she wouldn't use her student deferment because, "I'd feel like I was betraying people" in her home unit. "I'm not going to invalidate a conflict my comrades are being killed in.

"The antiwar protests by the public invalidate the risks that [people in the armed services] are taking. It's easy to say 'Stop the War' when you're not involved and not at risk."

But don't confuse her with a Republican, Lois insisted. "I voted for Nader. I don't particularly like George W. Bush. But when I'm in [a military action], my friends are being killed. They're your family. You're going to protect your family."

Lois was previously involved in a relationship with another soldier, a Master Sergeant, who at the time of our interview was not only in Iraq, but was reportedly a prisoner of war. "He wrote me a letter from Iraq before he was captured saying he was just doing his job. A lot of those people may not believe in the reasons for the conflict, but they have to do their jobs." According to an email from Lois at press time, the Master Sergeant had been "located," but "in ARMY terms that could mean a lot of things, like they misplaced him in the first place. He will be home in July." ▼

E. Lynne Lemont lives and writes in Franklin County.

Lesbian Alumna Lesléa Newman Sparks Gaypril & Passover

By JUDITH BECKETT

Prolific lesbian author and UVM alumna Lesléa Newman spoke and read some of her writing at the Waterman Building on the Burlington campus as part of the University's "Gaypril 2003" celebration. About 120 people attended the lecture "You Can't Be a Lesbian – You're Jewish!" and kosher reception. Lisa Fine of UVM Hillel first contacted Newman to make the presentation, and Hillel co-sponsored it with the UVM Women's Center and the LGBTQA Services Center.

Dot Brauer, Coordinator of LGBTQ&A Services, introduced Newman, saying that although this is the second year that there has been a gay alumni event at UVM, it is the first time that an alumnae has made a presentation to the community.

Newman received a bachelor's degree in creative writing and social sciences from UVM 25 years ago. Before she spoke, a man approached her in the hall and said, "You can't be a lesbian – you're Jewish!" The same remark 25 years before had prompted Newman to explore the interface between Jewish identity and lesbian sexuality. Newman, relating this fresh incident, said it was discouraging how little things had changed.

She also remembered that as a student at UVM, she had heard Rita Mae Brown read her work. She told herself then, "Someday I'm going to do that."

"And here I am!" she told the audience with a proud smile.

Newman read three of her poems from her book, *Signs of Love*, including "Passover Poem," because the reading occurred during Pesach, and another poem dedicated to her grandmother Ruth Levin, who died in 1989 at the age of 99. She also read two short stories from *A Letter to Harvey Milk*.

Newman said that she had recently read from *A Letter to Harvey Milk* at a college and neither the teachers nor the students present knew who Harvey Milk was. They thought she had made him up as a character. Those present at the UVM gathering were more well versed in gay history.

She said that the short story from *A Letter to Harvey Milk* has the distinction of being the only lesbian story in a Jewish anthology and the only Jewish story in a lesbian anthology. It has recently been produced as a play in Philadelphia and will soon be presented in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Newman has received many awards for her writing. In 1997 she was awarded a Poetry Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts. When she asked if they realized who she was, she learned that there had been some discussion about it. "We are not giving you the endowment for *Heather has Two Mommies*," she was told. "We are giving it to you to write poetry." Newman used the money to write the *Little Butch Book*. "Your tax dollars at work, folks," she told the audience.

"I know what kind of questions you're going to ask, so I'll answer them," she said, kicking off the question and answer period. Most of the questions were about writing, rather than identity, but, she said, "Whatever you write will offend somebody."

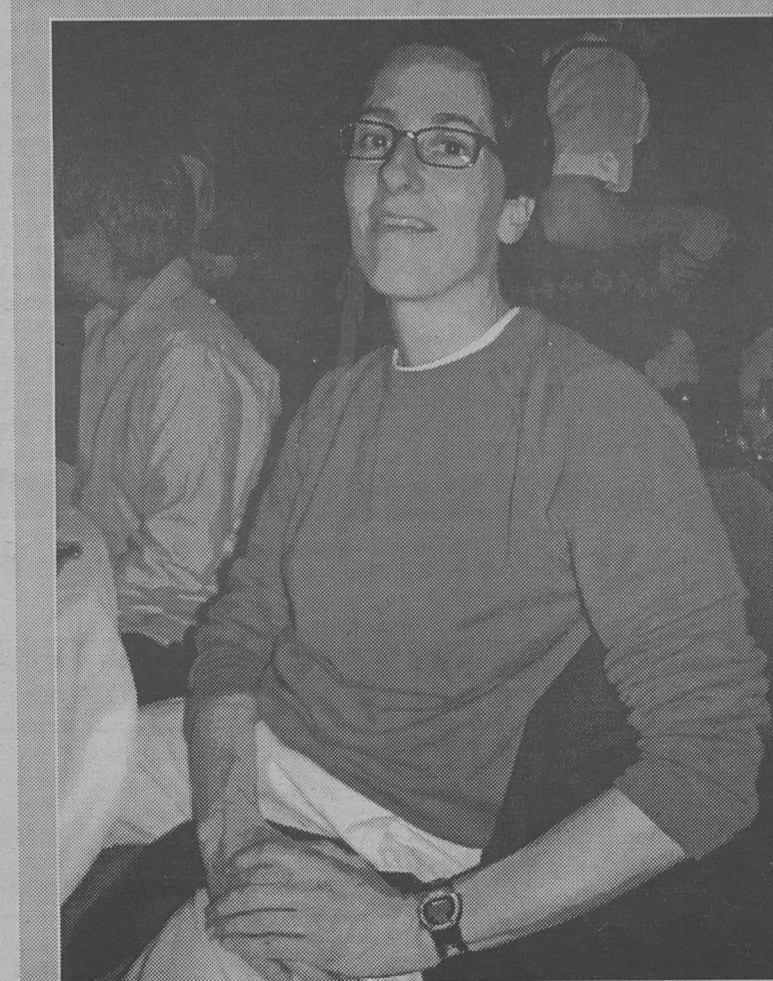
Encouraging the student writers in the room, she said that her story "Sunday Afternoon," which will be published soon in an anthology, was actually written for a class she had

taken that was taught by Vermont author and UVM English Professor David Huddle.

Newman answered questions for over an hour after the reading while

the attendees enjoyed kosher refreshments. ▼

Judith Beckett lives in Bradford.



Cartoonist **Alison Bechdel** (left) gave the keynote speech at the April 19 R.U.1.2?

Community Center fundraising dinner, covering her 20 years in cartooning for the community and beyond with hilarious and thoughtful sample panels from each year. Bechdel declared that, while assimilation may not be exactly what we want, "I'm tired of being a lesbian." That is, tired of being designated in a way that means something other than human. The dinner also honors an lgbtq volunteer of the year, as nominated by various community groups. Peter Jacobsen, chairman of the board of SafeSpace was awarded that honor, but could not be present to accept it. Post-dinner entertainment was provided by the Smittens and Yolanda and the Copilots.

Net proceeds from the dinner and silent auction were over \$6,000, according to R.U.1.2? Executive Director Christopher Kaufman.