

# community profile

BY LYNN MCNICOL

**P**aij Wadley-Bailey has been tackling issues of racism and homophobia — not to mention a few others such as the environment, education, and feminism — for much of her 65 years.

She's spent the last 30 of those years in Vermont, teaching, advocating and learning. Most recently she's been working hard to erase racial harassment in the public schools through the efforts of the Vermont Anti-Racism Action Team, of which she is the volunteer executive director.

"I always say 'volunteer director' because I don't want people to think I'm rich," Paij says with a laugh.

Along with other volunteers at VARAT, Paij has been putting in long hours to find solutions to racial incidents in the public schools, and to prevent other such incidents. The organization's hotline had been discontinued last year due to staffing problems, but with an increase in complaints, VARAT has the hotline working again.

"The impetus for the reinstatement of this hot line is because of the acceleration in the number of racial incidents in Vermont public schools, especially since 9/11 and with the significant influx of refugees of color to Vermont," Paij said at a January press conference.

VARAT held a special volunteer training in February, and there are now seven volunteer advocates to handle complaints and another 13 who are working on a preventive program called "Reading to End Racism."

VARAT receives funding from the Haymarket People's Fund and Uprooting Racism Task Force, the anti-racism arm of the Vermont Conference of United Churches of Christ. As for volunteers, VARAT could always use more help, but "We're holding our own" for now, according to Paij.

"If we get two calls a month, that's a lot," Paij says, since each incident represents about 100 hours of volunteers' work. Typically, the process includes a written statement by the family, a face-to-face meeting with VARAT, and authorization for VARAT to act on the family's behalf, usually in meetings with teachers and school administrators or others in the community.

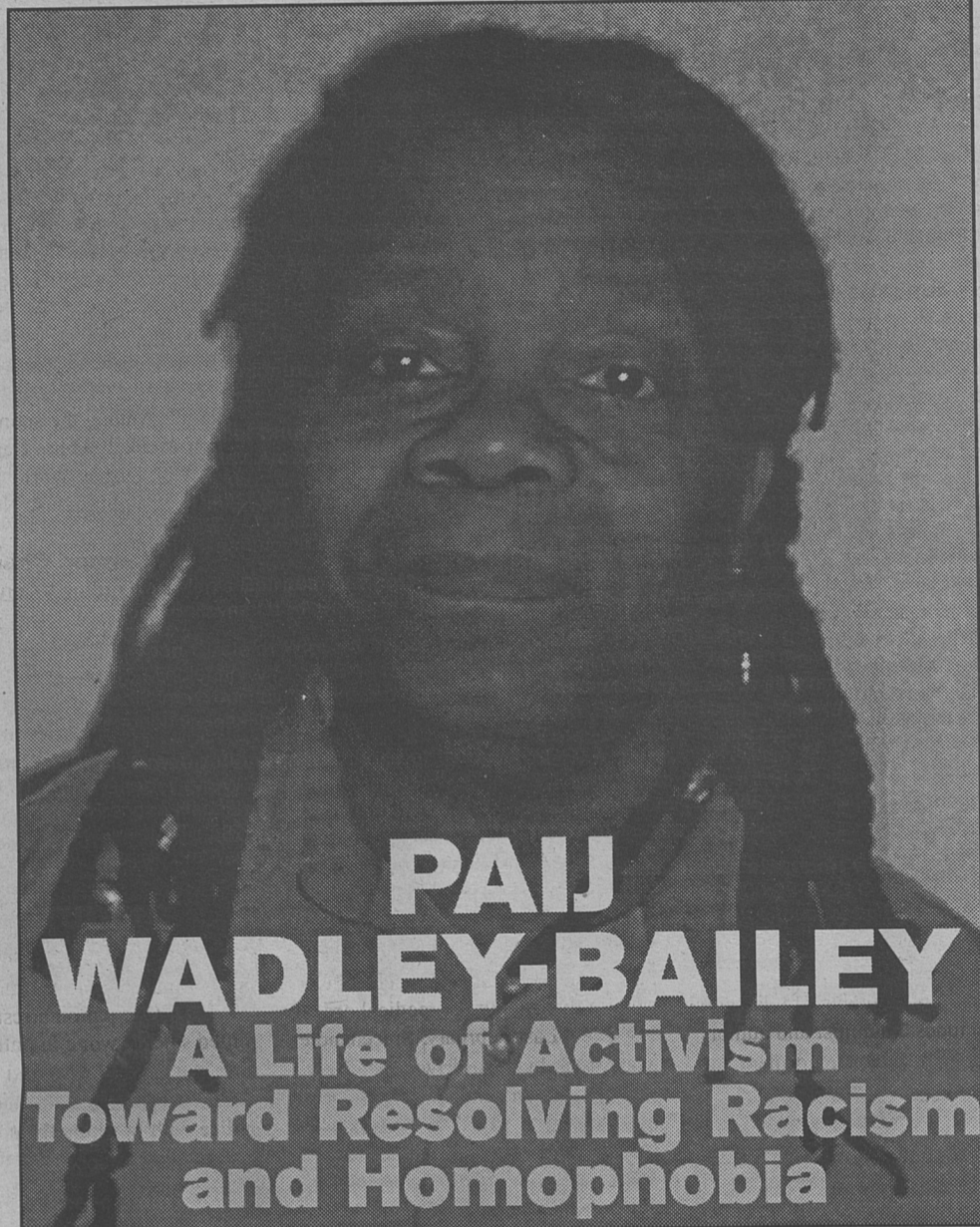
VARAT tries to avoid financial restitution that might involve stopping federal school funds, which she says would help no one. Rather, families tend to want anti-racism training for faculty and school staff. Advocates are now working with two families who are seeking restitution from their school districts.

VARAT also helps families to help themselves. "We empower the families to be self-advocates — and when they find their voice, look out!"

Currently, VARAT is helping two families who called the hotline for help. In one family, a single Native American parent is working to bring about more truthful representation of Native history to the child's school. Another family, whose son was kicked off the basketball team, is in the process of addressing alleged unfair treatment by a coach.

Paij says issues of racist harassment are so prevalent in Vermont schools that some families of color are home-schooling their children. While people may complain that these children are not being "socialized," Paij declares that what they are not being socialized to do is to spit on, beat up, shove, call names or otherwise harass other kids.

Paij is one of two lesbians on



VARAT's board, and sees little difference between racial and anti-gay incidents.

"Oppression by any other name is oppression," Paij asserts. "The sad part is we go into a school to deal with racism, and a principal or school board person will demand that we don't bring up homophobia." They say issues regarding the GLBT community are "explosive."

"My answer is [to ask] how can I talk about one oppression without linking it to other oppression and call myself an educator with integrity?"

It's not the first time Paij Wadley-Bailey — who identifies herself as African-American, ecofeminist, womanist, lesbian, bulldagger, grandmother and mother — has been on the cutting edge of making local

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institutions more inclusive. In 1999, when she heard then-new president Judith Ramaley of the University of Vermont speak about diversity but "did not say lesbian," Paij, among others, made sure Ramaley heard about one of her identities. Ramaley listened and organized a meeting at her house of campus lesbians and gays. Thanks to continuing efforts from gay and lesbian students, staff, and faculty, and the responsiveness of the then-provost, the first LBGTQA services

coordinator's position was created, and Paij landed the job, which she held until 2001.

Paij, who came to Vermont to study social ecology at Goddard College in the 1970s, founded the Gay and Lesbian Studies Program there, an accomplishment she's proud of. She subsequently earned a master's in education because social ecology was considered radical and by going the more conventional route she was able to incorporate both methods in her teaching.

Now living in Montpelier, she teaches a class called "Race and Culture" to all first-year UVM students in the schools of education, social work, math, and engineering. Mostly of European descent, her students are a "lot of work" because they get to the point where they are inquisitive, and Paij

answers with letters and e-mails and meets regularly with students outside of class.

Paij grew up in West Hills, Connecticut, where she lived until she was 24. She got married, and her husband returned to the Air Force. They moved around, to Massachusetts and New York, and "a light came on" for Paij regarding her military life.

"By that time I was becoming more aware of the racism and the violence inherent

in militarism," Paij recalls. "I was furious."

Paij, then the mother of two children, returned to Connecticut. She and her husband attempted a reconciliation, which didn't work out. But she became pregnant and had her third child. Later she took a male partner with whom she had a daughter "just prior to my awakening as a lesbian."

Paij identifies herself as a "bulldagger" — a term given to black lesbian counterparts to male rodeo "bulldoggers." It's a heritage she's excited about finding her roots to, and plans to join with other bulldaggers at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival this summer.

She also wants to find her Nigerian name.

That's in addition to her continuing studies at UVM, where she's working on a doctorate in education in the area of information managing and gathering and "who does it benefit?"

She's also interested in having a sheep farm, and has learned to shear sheep during a trip to Missouri. While pursuing her many other interests, Paij remains deeply committed to advocating for others of her race.

Paij spoke in Burlington for Martin Luther King Day about why she does anti-racism work. During the 1950s, she lived for a year in Florida where she had the only African-American teacher she ever had in the only segregated school she ever attended. Her sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Ethel Moore, kept a box of books hidden in her classroom that were about African American people who had made important contributions to the world.

"This learning was deep and personal," Paij remembers. "It was important because it was about people like us, and it was secret. She didn't have to tell us not to tell anyone about these books: we knew they were dangerous when she appointed one of us to be a look-out person at the window so that if the (white) superintendent of schools came on one of his unannounced inspections, he would not 'catch us' using them. These books — their physical existence and the stories they hold — taught me about unspoken truths, secrets and lies."

The children knew not to tell anyone that Mrs. Moore and her husband were key people starting a chapter of the NAACP. It was dangerous then for more than three black people to get together, "except in church."

"Just how dangerous was forcefully taught us on the day toward the end of the school year when Mrs. Moore, her family and their house were blown up." The children walking to school saw the mangled bodies and were ushered on to school, where parents met them and spent the day talking about what happened.

"We wept, we moaned, we stared open-mouthed at the ceiling, and by the end of that day, our childhood was over."

Paij remembers the power of words and the lie that words cannot hurt.

"This is why I do this work: education/activism. And, in honor of Mrs. Ethel Moore and others like her whose loving courage and tragic death taught me about the power of words — all words — including my own." ▼

*The VARAT hotline number for reporting racial harassment and getting help with racial justice in schools is 1-866-Y-Racism (1-866-972-2476). Lynn McNicol lives and writes in Burlington.*