

community profile

BY LYNN McNICOL

Eight years ago, Sharon Randall remembers, she was standing in her kitchen looking at her calendar and feeling drained by all her commitments as an activist in her Long Island community. She had been deeply involved in fundraising for pro-gay political candidates, was a founder, producer and co-anchor of the Long Island Rainbow Connection TV show, and worked on a lengthy campaign against the homophobic film *The Gay Agenda*.

When she and her partner decided to pack up and move to northern Vermont in 1996, Sharon took a year off from her political activities to enjoy her new country home and rest up from her busy city life, which included her years working as a psychiatric nurse.

After a year, she realized the one thing she missed the most was the TV show. Sharon noted that other than the Cherie and Yolanda show, and this newspaper, there was little news of the glbt community. "Jeanne and I spoke about what it would take to start up a 'sister' program in Vermont and decided that it was something we were good at, knew a lot about, and as long as we didn't get involved over our heads, we could swing it," Sharon recalls.

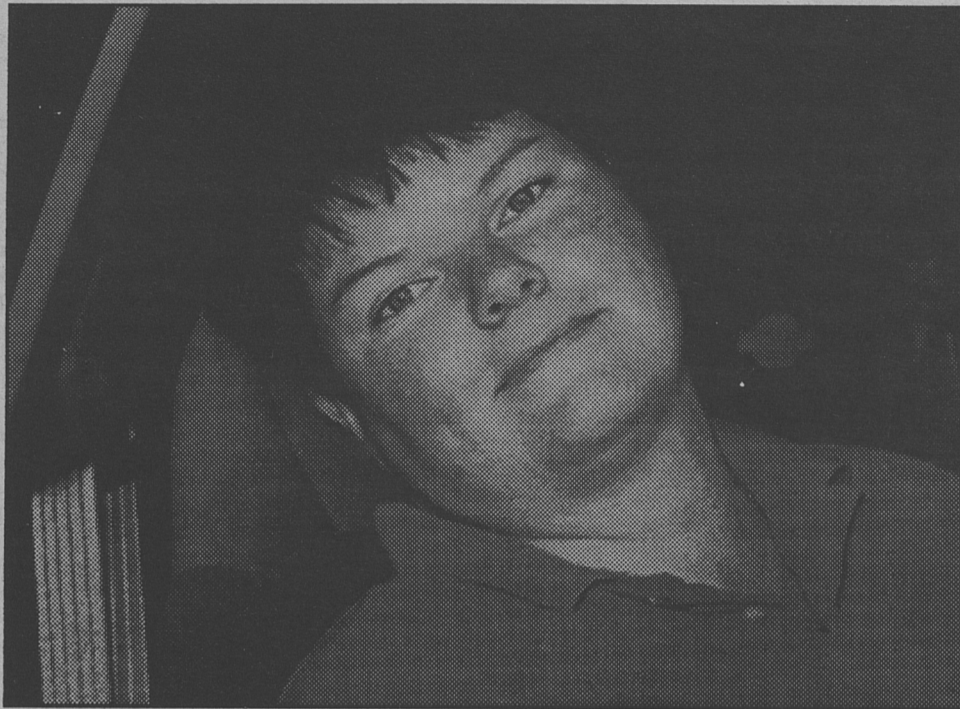
In 1998, Sharon and other volunteers had *The Vermont Rainbow Connection* TV show up and running. The show airs at 9 p.m. Fridays on Channel 15 in Burlington and at different times on other cable stations. Rainbow Connection won R.U.1.2?'s Volunteer of the Year Award in 2000 and has clearly reached out to Vermont's gender minorities.

"Producing and co-anchoring a TV show helped me connect to various people and organizations," Sharon says. "I also wanted to ... channel the outrage I felt at the injustices l/g/b/t people face in their everyday lives."

Sharon adds that she's often touched by the feedback she receives. A man working at a local establishment recognized her from *Rainbow Connection* and whispered his appreciation for the show and his delight at seeing her in person. A woman who was unable to attend Pride Day in Burlington sent an e-mail to say how much it meant to her to see Pride Day on TV.

"Although P-FLAG of Champlain Valley and Equality Vermont (formerly VCLGR), have been sponsors since day one," Sharon explains, "the majority of the show's financial responsibility was falling on my shoulders each month. I had paid several thousand dollars to have a set designed and built, as well as incorporation fees, supplies, etc."

Three years ago when civil unions were front-page news, Sharon relates, she picked up her mail one day from the post office. In the mail was a letter from a Chicago couple, Ken Blyer and his partner, who had vacationed in Vermont. They had been saving money for a car, but decided instead to split the



Sharon Randall & The Vermont Rainbow Connection

account among Vermont lgbt nonprofits they had encountered.

"I remember sitting in my truck reading the letter and getting all teary-eyed at their kind words of support. The letter would have been enough of a 'feel good' moment, but in the envelope there was also a check for \$2000.

"Jeanne and I decided that it was something we were good at, knew a lot about, and as long as we didn't get involved over our heads, we could swing it."

I was absolutely speechless (which is a rarity for me)." Thanks to that donation, she was able to recoup some of the money she had put into the show to keep it going.

While acknowledging she is the backbone of *The Vermont Rainbow Connection*,

Sharon says that without the small but dedicated volunteer staff the show would not be possible. Stuart Granoff, creator of the *Greenlanders* cartoon in this paper, co-anchors the show with Sharon.

Stuart is extremely witty and brings such humor and levity to the show, Sharon

says. "He's a good balance to me - I get stuck in such outrage, reporting on horrific stories and injustices against our people."

Jeanne Caruso has been the show's volunteer technical director and stage manager since its inception. Tuija Lindell is the show's

director and provides varied footage for the show. And Tina Giangrande built and maintains the Rainbow Connection / Lavender Visions website.

Then there's Cameron, Sharon's 13-year-old son, who has been helping behind the scenes for over three years. Sharon is obviously proud of him and his positive attitude.

"Cameron's participation in the TV show and his exposure to so many organizations and wonderful lgbt and allied people have helped him to feel proud of being a part of this community, rather than feeling like having two moms is something that he has to keep quiet about."

The family has experienced some opposition in the Fairfax community where they live, but in response has reached out to educate those in the school system about diversity issues. "They were pretty receptive to it," Sharon says.

Meanwhile she and the rest of the Rainbow Connection crew keep our community up to date about our collective issues, beginning with an "Out & About" segment that includes a calendar of community events and Action Alerts. Following "various Public Service announcements from various sources," the second half of the show is the Focus On segment made up of interviews, events coverage, or clips from documentaries.

Some of the best shows inform and entertain at the same time. "Fresh Attitudes," which aims to help gays stop smoking, interviews local drag queens (pun intended), health professionals and community members. Gender minorities - especially lesbians at 43 percent - smoke at a much higher rate than the general population.

In a *Rainbow Connection* show produced last year, "Homophobia in the Workplace," Brian McNaught educated corporate America about gay issues at work, ranging from gay jokes to harassment to death threats. He said the companies that hire him understand that homophobia affects a person's productivity and that every employee is to be valued.

The most recent (August 2003) show includes an interview with Lucie Blue Tremblay, whose coming out song is the show's theme. Lavender Visions, the parent organization of the *Rainbow Connection*, is producing the Pride fundraiser organized by the Canadian singer-songwriter.

Sharon encourages anyone interested in helping out to contact her. Nobody gets paid, she says, but the rewards are many. The show is produced by Lavender Visions Productions, a 501c3 nonprofit. Contact The Vermont Rainbow Connection, c/o Lavender Visions Productions, Inc., P.O. Box 3265, Burlington, Vermont 05401. www.together.net/~lavender or e-mail lavender@together.net. ▼

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