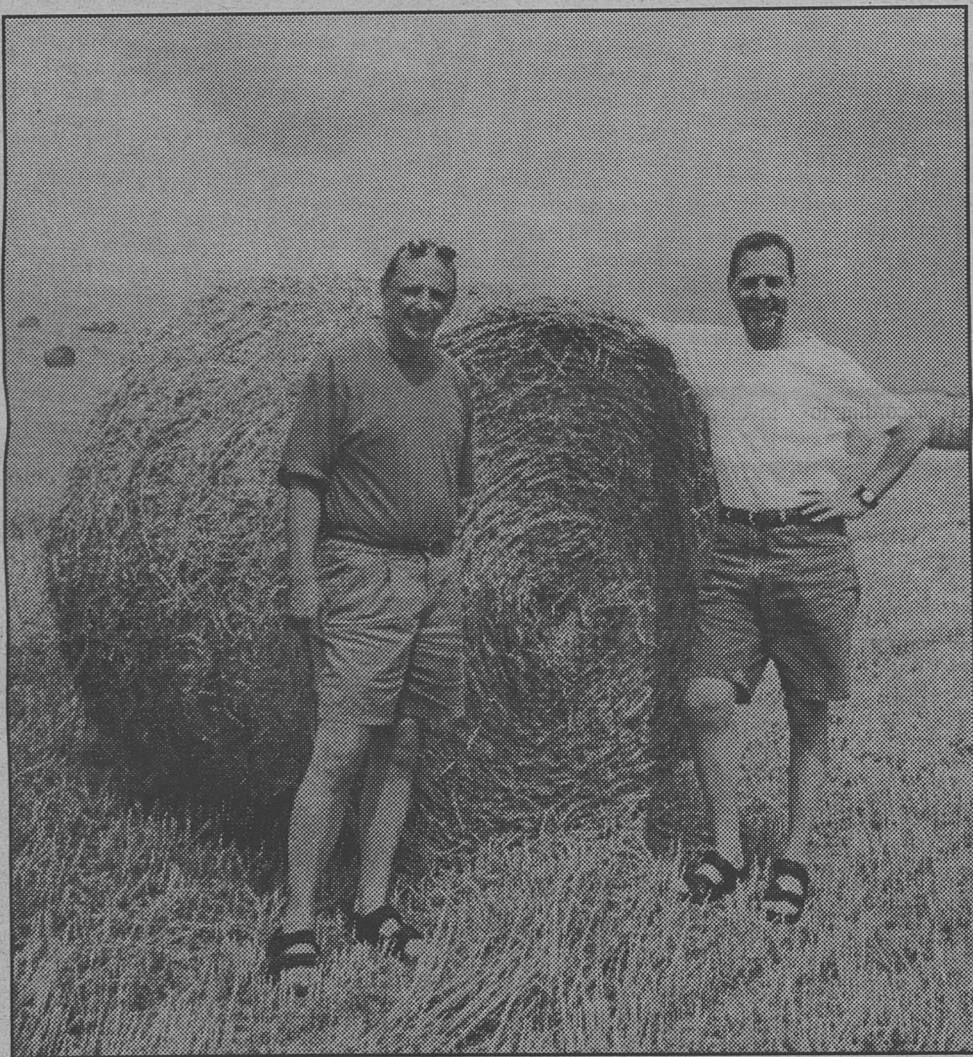


Welcome to Vermont!

LGBT Innkeepers Find Neighbors Live and Let Live



“The community doesn’t care that we are gay. Everyone has just accepted us.”

David Kanal, co-owner of the Deer Brook B&B in Woodstock

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

Okay, you’ve moved into the big house, the remodeling is done, you’re all set to open as a lesbian or gay-owned bed and breakfast in the gay-friendliest state in the union. What’s your biggest problem?

According to the innkeepers I spoke to, it’s not homophobia, but rousing interest among the GLBT communities within the state. Kathy Maieli owns Highgate Manor in Highgate Falls in the northwestern part of Franklin County. She says she’d like to host fundraisers and generally see more local customers use her banquet space. “But we are forty minutes from Burlington and people think that’s so far away.” Like many other gay innkeepers, she markets to the GLBT community with listings in *Lesbian Connection* and *PurpleRoofs.com* – which elicit lots of response from out of state. Unfortunately, in-state ads – even in LGBT media – bring in almost no business.

Bev Youree and Carol Nepton own Hummingbird Haven, a lesbian B & B in Berkshire (northern Franklin County). They market exclusively to the lesbian honeymooner sector, but the only Vermont lesbian guests they see arrive in July when they have an annual picnic. With their two meadows and 53 acres, it would not be a problem for them to host a large outdoor ceremony and reception, but the bed and breakfast consists of one large suite and only accommodates two guests: “It really is a honeymoon suite.”

Almost all the innkeepers I spoke with have no in-state civil union business. After all, about three quarters of the civil unions performed in Vermont involve out-of-staters. And most of their gay couple guests come from out of state – probably an indication of the way Americans go on their honeymoons: like everyone else, lesbian and gay couples in Vermont go someplace ‘away.’

On the other end of Vermont, Chris Clay of the Stone Hearth Inn in Chester (southwest of Springfield, in Windsor County) is gearing up for the winter season. He too would like to see more local customers. Besides having a tavern that is officially open to the public, he is working on booking more regular entertainment with intent to attract a more local GLBT crowd.

Meanwhile in Woodstock (west of White River Junction in Windsor

County), David Kanal and his partner George DeFina are in the process of securing a liquor license and adding a pub to the Deer Brook B & B in order to attract local customers, straight and gay.

On the plus side, another constant refrain of innkeepers I spoke with – from the owners of Hummingbird Haven, looking out onto the Canadian plains, to Bob Shannon of A.Stone Wall Inn far to the south in Windham (northern Windham County) – is that they have had no trouble in their towns as gay business owners or couples. “I’ve had no reactions, really,” Shannon says. “We leave them alone, they leave us alone,” Jim McKimm of the River Bend B & B in Troy (Orleans County) says. David Kanal has found, “The community doesn’t care that we are gay. Everyone has just accepted us.”

“I’ve had no trouble,” according to Maieli of Highgate Manor. When she hosts a large gathering, it is a noticeable occurrence in the small Franklin County town. A wedding with 150 guests tends to bring a large and diverse crowd to the area. “Except, ...” she adds hesitantly,

Except that in the last election, Highgate Falls voted out every Justice of the Peace who was willing to perform civil unions. According to Vermont law, if a JP refuses to perform civil unions, he or she cannot perform conventional marriage ceremonies either. Maieli can’t be certain that this move was aimed at her and her establishment, but it is hard not to take it personally.

Clay, of the Stone Hearth, suspects that there is probably plenty of “Take Back Vermont” sentiment left here, “but they don’t realize how much money the civil unions bring into the state.” In fact, most of the innkeepers are working harder to keep up with their growing businesses – and hiring more workers to put in jacuzzis, re-landscape their grounds, convert barns and other outbuildings. “Who knows what they know or don’t know,” Clay says of the local contractors he hired to convert a barn on his grounds. They are doing their work – and collecting their paychecks – and the innkeepers are doing theirs.

Perhaps the famous Vermont attitude, live and let live, has returned to its grass roots. ▼

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