

## Queer Summits: A Longer Look

BY EUAN BEAR

Following the fifth Queer Summit, it's worth taking a look at their history and what the summits have accomplished.

The first Queer Summit was held in May, 2002 in the community function room of the Burlington sewage treatment plant. A controversy arose over whether the working gay press (i.e., *OITM* editor Euan Bear) was allowed to take notes and quote participants on the record. The purpose was networking and sharing both strengths and challenges with an eye toward pooling skills and resources whenever possible. Some of the strongest needs articulated were fundraising, board recruitment and retention, and volunteer recruitment.

QS2 was also held in Burlington, in August at the Fletcher Free Library, with a long list of organizations (two dozen) sending representatives. A significant portion of the morning was spent discussing the upcoming elections, with the afternoon sessions more organization-centered: board and volunteer recruitment/retention; anti-oppression/working to end oppression in our own groups; fundraising efforts; and outreach for rural organizing.

QS3 had 16 groups represented at its January, 2003, meeting in South Royalton at the Vermont Law School, with some people wearing more than one hat. Its purpose was "To bring together queer and ally community activists/organizations for networking to familiarize ourselves with each other's work, to create understanding of common issues and strategies, and to build an effective queer movement in Vermont."

After a legislative preview, courtesy of Equality Vermont, issues included rural organizing; anti-oppression/anti-racism work; transgender issues; and fundraising.

The fourth Queer Summit, hosted by Rep. Bill Lippert at the State House in Montpelier last May, drew representatives of a dozen organizations. After organizational updates and a legislative overview, the major presentations were on trans issues – with a review of oppression, legal status, and potential strategies to achieve equality (or at least make discrimination illegal) – and the Unity Project, which will be funneling \$240,000 into Vermont LGBT organizations.

Queer Summit 5, back in Burlington last month, generated controversy even before it met. Lluvia

Mulvaney-Stanak emailed the Queer Summit online listserve to express her frustration with long meetings that seem to accomplish so little.

"I am always eager to have these summits be effective in networking & building a stronger queer community among all the Vermont organizations that attend," Mulvaney-Stanak wrote. "With this upcoming meeting, it looks as though most of this will be confined to the 3 [-minute] reports & lunch time."

Further, she wrote, "I think it is fantastic that we are looking at the issues of race within our community, but expecting to effectively explore this large social issue and connect it with preexisting and potential work that we must do here in Vermont in 40 minute & 90 minute chunks is a bit ambitious."

Mulvaney-Stanak, who works with Outright Vermont as a program specialist and with the Diversity Health Project, facilitated the previous summit's discussion of trans issues.

"I wrote that to express my overall frustration with being in a queer community in a rural state – that there's so little measurable outcome," Mulvaney-Stanak said in a phone interview. She is a native Vermonter (born in Barre), she said, and she sees the rural nature of the state and the gay community's Burlington-centered focus as obstacles to statewide action. "I'm frustrated with people just accepting the status quo."

The Queer Summits she has attended, she said, have been "heavy on process and light on action." And, she noted, there has been "no follow-up on the last meeting's steps" with regard to extending outreach to rural LGBT people, especially to trans folk.

"If you triage the situation," Mulvaney-Stanak said, "the number one problem is that organizations don't have any idea that other groups are out there. We shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel. When we're there [at the meeting], we feel like one large community, but then we go back to our own little bubbles."

Racism, she suggested, is "okay" as a community topic for discussion and concern, "but why not classism? That's where the most oppression is in Vermont. What about ageism? Where are the youth on boards? Where are they in the decision-making process, especially on the HIV/AIDS organizations? Look at the statistics of who is getting infected."

Mulvaney-Stanak flatly stated, "No youth in their right mind would attend a meeting that's six hours long

on a Saturday. Program specialists like me are obligated to go."

She appreciates, she said, the effort and coordination provided by R.U.1.2? to make the summits happen, but she questions "who's setting the agenda?"

"The agendas," responded R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center Director Christopher Kaufman, "are created by the Queer Summit. We've been working from the third Queer Summit, which identified four topics of concern: fundraising, rural organizing, antiracism, and transgender awareness and support."

A review of summit notes showed that a constantly recurring topic is finding and keeping volunteers, especially board members. Asked how organizations could consider taking on other tasks when their structures are not stable, Kaufman acknowledged the difficulty.

"The next [topic] up is rural organizing," he said, "which might cover board retention and other organizational issues. We are so spread out, and the question becomes how do you get people involved? How do you work so that people don't feel left out by the fact that so much is happening in one part of the state? We just don't have the population base to draw on, unlike organizations in the big cities in other states," Kaufman concluded.

Two ideas that have come up at Summits but have yet to receive any attention are creating a database of current board members among community nonprofits and holding a "Volunteer Fair" to recruit volunteers. Kaufman suggested that a Volunteer Fair might happen at another event, such as R.U.1.2?'s annual fundraising dinner.

Another frequent member of the Summits is Kris Rowley, a.k.a. Baron Kristoff of the Barony of All Vermont. She sees the Summits' major contribution as making connections that didn't exist before among disparate organizations.

"For the Barony, the summits have been very valuable. I am not sure we use them the same way other organizations do since our function is very different from most others. We raise money to give away; they raise money to sustain themselves," Rowley explains.

"The summits have put us in touch with many organizations in the state that we might not have known exist. Also, it has helped us tremendously to get our name out into the community, to let people know that we are 'for real,' and to hopefully help us with membership. The measure of our success or failure is in the amounts of money we raise and give away each year, not on how much we raise to have in our bank account."

The next summit is scheduled for January, so stay tuned. ▼

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