

Making a Safer Space

Queer anti-violence group struggles for statewide acceptance

BY EUAN BEAR

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It's the second such occasion since SafeSpace opened its doors to provide services for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people who are being shoved, kicked, hit, manipulated or pressured into sex, or who are threatened, assaulted, or denied services because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

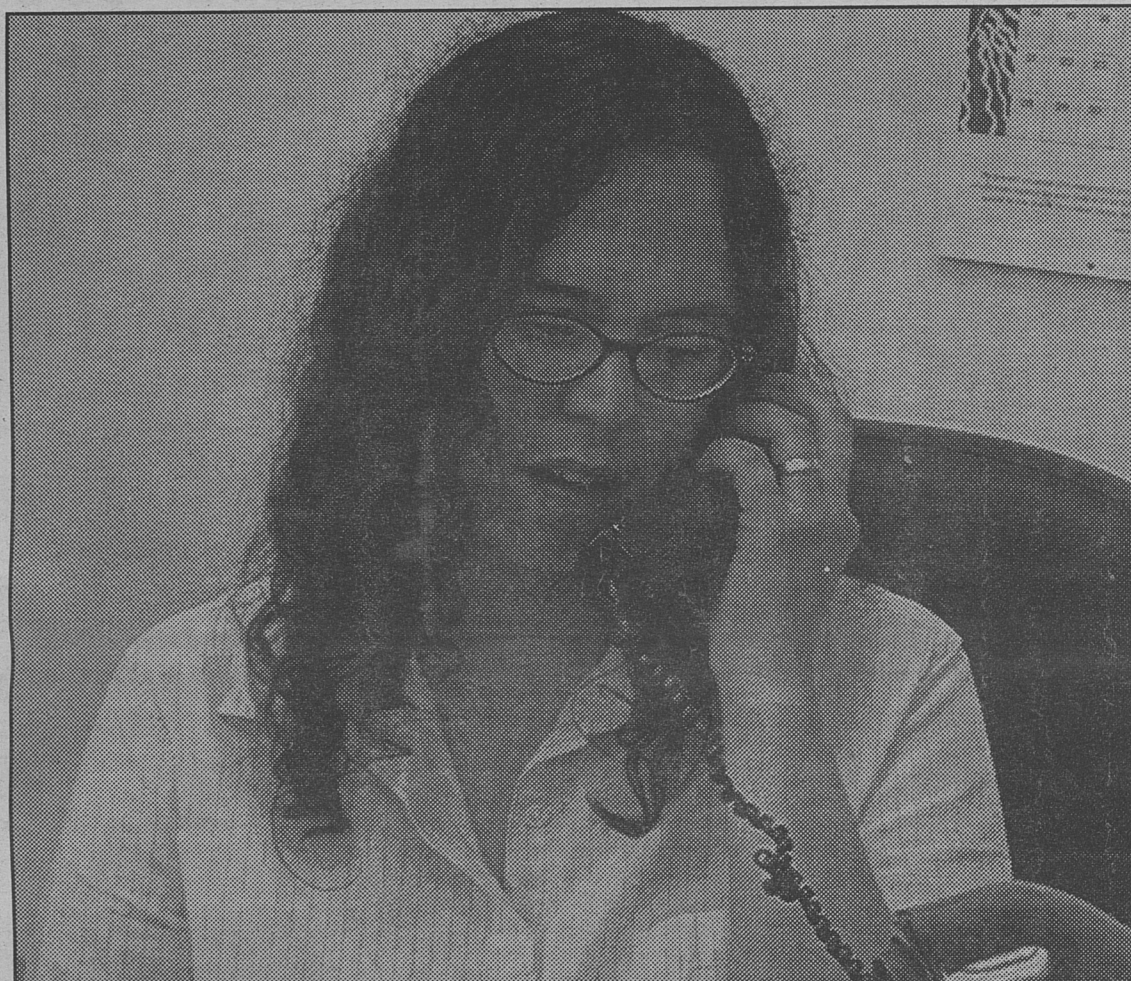
Despite the fact that several domestic violence and rape programs were founded by lesbians, it has been difficult for some programs to welcome gay men who are being hit or raped by their male partners or by their dates, or transwomen or transmen whose families or partners or acquaintances have assaulted them, or to take seriously the threat posed to a lesbian by her woman partner.

Hence the need for SafeSpace's dual missions: to help lgbtq victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and bias crimes; and to train the staffs of other domestic violence and sexual assault agencies to provide "culturally competent" services.

For our communities, receiving "culturally competent services" begins with conversations that don't assume the gender of the assailant or the partner.

Even three years after civil unions, and 11 years after the legislature outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, queer "cultural competence" is not necessarily a given in domestic violence service agencies.

Director Kara DeLeonardis says that SafeSpace was formed with a lot of support from local agencies—especially Women Helping Battered Women and the Women's Rape Crisis Center. The directors of both those organizations say that they are committed to the complementary goals of providing culturally competent services and advocacy for lgbt survivors of sexual and domestic violence in their own agencies and supporting a broad array of options so that survivors can get services from whatever agency they feel most



"Because we have an explicit focus, members of the community know that they will talk to other queers, that they won't be judged."
Kara DeLeonardis, SafeSpace Director

comfortable with.

So why hasn't SafeSpace, an agency providing domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy services, been allowed to join the Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault? The Network is a coalition of 16 domestic violence and sexual assault programs across the state. The board of directors of the Network organization consists of the 16 member-program directors.

No New Members

Safe Space has been trying to become a member for over a year, only to be told that the Network is "restructuring" and "redefining" its membership standards. A three-year moratorium on admitting new members to the Network or funding new shelters established by existing members was instituted in May.

DeLeonardis says she doesn't doubt the necessity for the Network's reorganization or the sin-

cerity of their support for Safe Space. "I finally got to meet with Rose Pulliam, the director of the Network. She came out and said that the Network office is really supportive of us, but that the office can't speak for all [member] programs; some programs are adamant about not serving men. Others question whether we represent a duplication of services."

But, she admits, "A part of me has just given up." It's ironic,

since DeLeonardis worked as an Americorps Vista worker at the Network office at the beginning of her career.

According to Chani Waterhouse, the Network's Program Support Coordinator, the Network is "glad Safe Space exists, and we respect their work and try to support them as much as possible." SafeSpace, she says, is not the only program with a niche clientele seeking Network membership; others include a program in the Deaf community, a transitional housing unit for women, and a group seeking accessibility to criminal justice services for mobility impaired clients.

The restructuring, creation of program standards, and establishment of membership criteria are proceeding slowly, Waterhouse explains, because the Network operates by consensus.

Funding's Role

Among the factors in play is an economic one. The Network administers federal grants, allocating financial resources among the various programs according to the services they offer and the areas they serve: If new members are admitted to the network, the same (or shrinking) federal grant pie will need to be sliced into more—thinner—pieces.

"There are financial ramifications," Waterhouse admits. "But in my work with program directors and staff, I feel confident that they are making these decisions with a higher purpose in mind, not primarily money." Among the overarching principles of the Network and its members, she says, is serving underserved populations.

Waterhouse also says that the membership moratorium has less to do with SafeSpace and its commitment to serve lgbt victims and survivors of violence and more with the fact that three existing member programs opened new shelters within the last two years, putting a strain on the Network's funding formula.

Currently SafeSpace receives about 67 percent of its funding through the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services, but has no access to domestic violence funding through the Network. The remaining funding comes

>>