

Views: Recapturing the Spirit

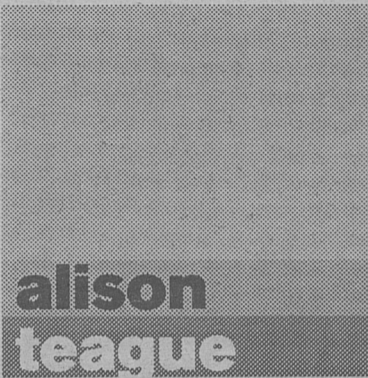
I was honored to witness an event at the Tip Top Café in White River Junction, sponsored by G/LEARN (Gay/Lesbian Educational and Resource Network) and organizer Alexis Jetter, that was in itself a continuation of feminist, women's, lesbian, and gay rights history. It brought together women, primarily lesbians, who were in the Upper Valley during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, when women's rights, feminism, anti-war and anti-nuke protests, and gay and lesbian rights were being birthed. Many of the women were "laying their bodies on the line" for their vision.

Women's 'herstories' are often passed on in an oral tradition, as was the case here, with a cadre of 15 or 16 women sharing their "reminiscences" of finding themselves a part of women's herstory, here in the Upper Valley, in New York City and parts in between. They all eventually ended up in the Connecticut River Valley to live

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their chosen lifestyles. Some were women loving women wanting to raise their children between them, leaving "really pissed off husbands behind," loading their second-hand cars with their worldly goods, children and lover, and heading north "to find bliss" in the '60s to raise their children together as a family. The stories conveyed anything but an easy life for these women and their children, but in the end success. "The lesbians came to me," one local woman said in gratitude at being exposed to and becoming a part of a lesbian community, a community of women.

A mother and daughter shared their separate viewpoints on being a family of two mothers and one



of three children. The now adult-child spoke of her fear and terror at having to explain why she had two mommies, and being called "a lesbo" by heartless classmates. The compassion of the adult young woman in looking back, and her pain and fear from that time, were palpable. And she was seen to blossom in strength and pride symbolizing all that women endure for truth of heart and soul. Tears of memory glinted in several eyes during the telling of these women's stories.

There was humor too, in a replay of an event founder Mandy Vernalia recalled that was held long ago in the Amelia's Underground Flying Society in Lebanon, New Hampshire, a place for lesbians to hang out. In a skit, three women, all in their 50s and early 60s, re-enacted women loving women, with one playing Cupid chasing the other two women, shooting arrows. The performance gave visibility to rights that have changed a lot in legality and openness since the time this little skit was first performed 20 years ago.

Betty Jean Michelson and Linda Mulley spoke of their lives in New York from 1969 to 1974, as they simply followed their desire to find other lesbians, or became part of the emerging women's movement. They hung out in now-famous gay and lesbian meeting places of the city, bars that were frequently raided by police who hadn't gotten their payoffs, and were run by the mob, such as the Stonewall Inn. They participated in consciousness-raising programs and happenings where the first feminist groups emerged as the West Village Brigade and the New York Radical Feminists.

They recalled the birth of feminist discussions and decisions on whether rape was a political subject, and Speak Outs where women talked of the presence of these violations in their everyday lives, and began to discover in one another common themes of oppression. They remembered the feminist action of taking over the editor's office of the Ladies Home Journal, demanding a female editor be put in place and an insert of articles that "should" be published in their next

issue. They were successful in getting articles published, and eventually saw a female editor replace the former male editor.

Linda MacDonald came up to Dartmouth College with the New York Radical Feminists Speakers Bureau, bringing speakers such as Rita Mae Brown and Susan Brownmiller, to "knock the socks off those boys and girls up there." Several of the speakers at the G/LEARN event were members of the first and second classes of women admitted to Yale and Dartmouth after they went co-ed in the early 1970s.

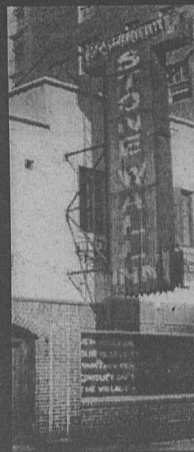
Perry (Parrish) Dobson spoke of her time at Yale and Dartmouth during those years, and her participation in the 8-minute film *Transformations* with Barbara Hirschfeld, another local woman. Beth Dingman, photographer and publisher, introduced the grainy black and white film with a John Cage-like score of plunked strings and drums finding cadences in the film through editing cuts and the strange dancing of the women in long dark robes holding corn, the earth's bounty and harvest, on a hillside in Thetford. Another video shot with national and local movements was a record of Women Against War and anti-nuke events, when the vision was believable and accessible, and the power of social change and consciousness raising was in the hands of women, young and old, all over the United States.

These women represented all phases of the rise of feminism, the rights of women, and the eventual gaining of rights for gays and lesbians in the Upper Valley. The comment was made more than once that most of these women did not know what they were a part of until later. But in retrospect, they could see in their own life experiences the roots of significant changes in the rights of women, gays, and lesbians across the country.

Now in their 50s, 60s, and 70s, these women carried the rights this newly out lesbian enjoys today on their shoulders. While I was a part of the anti-war, anti-nuke marches and protests, these women went further and coalesced a movement that has borne tangible fruit for today's women and gay and lesbian populations all over the world.

It is worth noting that John Quimby, the owner of the Tip Top Café and host of the event, was welcoming to all of us and would like to make the restaurant available for more such gatherings. The women's herstory, he said, "stirred admiration for those who tackled the issues long before I was ready." ▼

Allison Teague is an artist, writer and photographer who lives in Fairlee.



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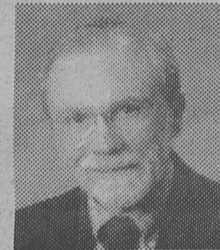
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