

**O**n January 19, Iowa holds the first presidential primary caucuses in our country. The results will have a major impact on who becomes the Democratic Party's candidate to take on George W. Bush next November. The following is a log of a three-day trip to Iowa my family and I took in December at the invitation of the Dean campaign to reach out to Iowa's glbt voters.

**Iowa Arrival**

My partner Scott, our three year-old son Sasha, and I landed in Des Moines on Tuesday, December 9. At the airport we were met by Donna Red Wing, a longtime GLBT activist, who is now a GLBT organizer for the Dean campaign. She's dedicated, smart, funny, and has a big heart. She and three-year-old Sasha hit it off immediately.

At the campaign office, Donna and I participated in a national conference call to lgbt media. The questions ran from medical marijuana to gay marriage.

**Des Moines LGBT Center**

With a mini-blizzard just starting, we were on our way to the Des Moines LGBT Center. Driving way below the speed limit for safety (and passing lots of neon signs, some 50 feet high), we arrived at the Center, in an office building across from a strip mall.

A dozen glbt activists of all political persuasions were there, asking lots of questions on fiscal policy, health care costs, health insurance access, and the economy. They were intrigued to hear about the real-world life of civil unions. I showed them our civil union certificate, and they touched it as if it were the Holy Grail. That's when I realized that they understood the power of what was accomplished in Vermont. We were living lives that most glbt Americans can only dream about.

**Which Burlington?**

The next morning, in near-white-out conditions, Scott, Sasha, and I drove two hours to Burlington, a union town in southeastern Iowa. The three people who braved the blizzard to meet us at a local restaurant for lunch told us of their closeted lives. They spoke in hushed voices and only got excited when they told us that the potato chips that came with our lunch were locally made. The largest gay group in town is actually PFLAG. I considered it a victory when one of the men told me he was previously a Gephardt supporter (if he was participating politically at all), but was now going to be supporting Dean.

With Scott cursing the weather (I can't believe that "our" Burlington is warmer than this one), we headed to the Iowa City Dean headquarters.

**Shopping for a President**

The Dean headquarters in this college town

**Campaigning in the Queer Heartland: Democratic activist Marty Rouse and his family meet lowans at Ground Zero for Dean's Campaign**



**In the heartland: (l to r) Scott Sherman, Donna Red Wing, Sasha Sherman, and Marty Rouse.**

was actually on the second level of a large shopping mall, along with the offices of the Edwards and Kerry campaigns. Other than campaign offices, all but one of the second-level storefronts of the mall were vacant (thanks to a bigger mall's recent opening in the suburbs). Donna and I made phone calls to

Czech social hall. With private money, the building is now a jewel of a visual arts gallery and performance space, and we met there with 20 or so folks who braved the icy conditions to meet with us.

We were introduced by a woman who considered herself apolitical until recent-

**The Quad Cities lgbt community center hosts the largest safe space for lgbt youth in the Midwest but doesn't get support for its programs from the state.**

lgbt-supportive voters. Scott and Sasha went shopping. They had more success than we did - we mainly got answering machines.

**Parents' Pride**

Time to drive 30 miles to Cedar Rapids. The 1891 Legion Arts Building was originally a

ly. Shortly after her daughter came out as a lesbian, she and her husband joined PFLAG. The questions focused mainly on the economy and healthcare and Howard Dean's background. There was a yearning to learn about life in Vermont and about Howard Dean. A woman came up as we were leaving and told me, "I was leaning towards Gephardt, but now

I'm voting for Dean." A "vote" here means standing in the corner of a caucus room designated for the candidate you're supporting. It's not a paper or computer ballot.

After a slippery drive to a fast food restaurant for dinner in the car, we arrived safely in Davenport for the night.

**Food for the Soul**

Off to the Davenport Unitarian Church for our final official visit. The 20 attendees discussed jobs, healthcare, Native American issues, and civil unions. A local network television affiliate was eager to show Quad City viewers what a civil union certificate looks like. We left the church after we broke (real) bread with our hosts (and had some cheddar soup), and headed back to the campaign office.

The local Dean campaign staff were thrilled to have us there. They told us of the energy in Iowa for Howard Dean. Many of the Dean campaign staff in Iowa are gay or lesbian.

On the way to the airport, we made two unofficial stops. One was to the Quad Cities lgbt community center. It hosts the largest safe space for lgbt youth in the Midwest outside of Chicago and has a growing program for seniors, but doesn't get support for its programs from the state of Iowa.

**Back to School**

Our final stop was a visit to a local gay-straight alliance in a high school (actually named SOUP for Students Organized to Unite People - no 'gay' in the title). The founder told us of the homophobia he faced in school, mainly from the school's administration. Another student told us of constant harassment from fellow students. He said, "I get by all right. I have it OK, I guess." There were issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation being dealt with by these young people. It was almost a dream-like show-and-tell as I passed around the civil union certificate.

**Just a Dream?**

I left Iowa realizing that glbt-Iowans (and perhaps all of us) are more like mainstream Americans than we generally think. Gay marriage, medical marijuana, and gays-in-the-military are not burning issues here. I also realized how important it was for Vermonters to share our stories with the rest of the country. Vermont is a special place. Whether it's the freedom to be who we are, the security of our relationships with civil unions, or the billboard- and neon-free interstate, we are truly living an American Dream. In a few short weeks, Iowans will play a key role in determining whether that Vermont dream can become more of a reality in America. ▼

*Marty Rouse keeps track of politics in Richmond.*