

# Equality Vermont Sets Legislative Priorities For 2004 Session

By PAUL OLSEN

With the opening of the 2004 legislative session in Vermont, gay and lesbian activists identified three legislative priorities they hope will become law this year.

According to Equality Vermont's Virginia Renfrew, bills addressing harassment in schools, medical marijuana, and adding gender identity to the state's nondiscrimination statutes are of specific interest to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Vermonters.

The school harassment bill, H.113, would clarify the definition of sexual and racial harassment, hold harassers legally liable in court, and specify elements of harassment prevention training for teachers.

Although harassment based on a student's sexual orientation is already prohibited by law in Vermont, Renfrew says passage of H.113 will strengthen the existing statute. "It will certainly benefit anyone who is being harassed in school," she told *Out in the Mountains*. "The focus is on racial harassment,

but for the queer community this is an important bill. Although we've had a [harassment] law since 1996, it doesn't really have any teeth to it. This bill, if we can get it through, has some teeth."

A bill legalizing medical marijuana for medical purposes is a priority for many Vermonters living with HIV/AIDS. H.111 "proposes to exempt seriously ill people from prosecution and prison for using medical marijuana under a doctor's supervision." A similar bill passed the state Senate last year but is opposed by Governor James Douglas (R).

"There are alternatives [to medical marijuana]," Douglas recently said on Vermont Public Radio. "THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, is available through a pill form that's been approved by the Food and Drug Administration, and I think that's the appropriate agency for making the determination. Those are the professionals, not the Vermont Legislature."

For her part, Renfrew isn't sure how H.111 will play out this year. "Medical marijuana passed the Senate last year with a 22 to 8 vote," she said. "It is now in the House Health

& Welfare Committee. It seems there is a possibility there will be at least a hearing on it. We're certainly not giving up this year on this. We will continue to push on it until we get it passed."

Vermont would become the fourth state to prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity if a bill introduced last year by Rep. Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg) and three cosponsors becomes law. The bill's intent is "to add gender identity to the list of protected classes in various statutes," including those affecting employment, public accommodations, housing, and credit.

Renfrew says H.366 is unlikely to be acted on this year. "I'd say this year is kind of an education," she said. "I would love to have the House Judiciary Committee have a day of hearings about it, and I am talking with some transgender people about testifying why this is important. Will it get through this year? Probably not, but I never want to say no."

According to the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC), a Washington DC-based advocacy group committed to fighting discrimination and violence

caused by gender stereotypes, only four states have passed laws outlawing discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Vermont law already prohibits discrimination and hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation.

Finally, three bills – one in the House and two proposed constitutional amendments in the Senate – would repeal civil unions and establish a clause defining marriage as between a man and a woman, respectively. None of these bills is likely to see action this year.

On January 30, gay and lesbian Vermonters had the opportunity to "storm the Statehouse" by participating in Equality Vermont's "Queer Visibility Day" to lobby legislators. According to Renfrew, the event is "a really important day for queer organizations to be there and let legislators know what they do. It is also important to have many people there from the queer and ally community to say these issues are important and we want them to be passed." ▼

*Paul Olsen lives in Colchester and also writes for In Newsweekly.*

## Nine Parts for a Party: A Report from Queer Summit VI

By CHRISTOPHER KAUFMAN

At the end of a bitter cold week, over 40 queer and allied organizers representing 27 different Vermont organizations made the trek to the Vermont Law School in South Royalton on January 17th for the sixth Queer Community Summit, organized by R.U.I.2? Community Center. Despite reports of numerous cars off the road, determined activists gathered to address the important issues surrounding queer organizing in rural communities.

This Summit had the largest attendance to date. Groups coming for the first time included ACoRN, an AIDS service organization serving the Upper Connecticut River Valley; G/LEARN, a Norwich-based volunteer group working with educators; Gedakina, a Native American group based in Woodstock; Spectrum Youth and Family Services of Rutland; and the Lambda Student Association from Vermont Technical College.

Jeff Bercuvitz facilitated the Summit courtesy of the Snelling Center for Government. Based at the University of Vermont, the Snelling Center was founded to

be a living memorial to Republican Governor Richard Snelling as a "non-partisan, not-for-profit organization" that "trains, encourages, and supports Vermonters who wish to become involved" in democracy at the state and local level. I am a 2004 Associate of the Vermont Leadership Institute of the Snelling Center, and the first leader of a specifically queer organization to participate in the program.

We skipped the organizational reports and, after adorning ourselves with memorable nicknames ("Clowning Christopher," "Endowed Ethan," "Jazzy Judy," "Sassy Sarah") we began by identifying things we do that bring joy to our lives ("pleasure-treasures"). Among others, people listed skills as song-writers, papier mâché artists, drag kings, and a "marketing genius!"

Later, participants identified strengths and assets in our talent pool, places that members of our community gather, and "community treasures," defined as the special places, events, and people that are truly distinctive about our community.

Jeff quickly got us up out of our seats: we divided into three groups to work through an obstacle course that required cooperative teamwork to cross and a creative understanding that sometimes obstacles can

conceal hidden resources.

After lunch, and having written 20-word personal mission statements, we connected with each other in the "purpose web." The web was a visual symbol of the strong connections between the people in the room. Jeff commented that the Queer Summit purpose web was "much tighter than many groups I have worked with."

Ultimately, the point of the day was to ensure that Vermont's queer organizers gained new tools to understand their own personal and organizational assets, to creatively work through obstacles as a team and to build stronger relationships with each other.

The last part of the day was devoted to an exercise called "Nine Parts for a Party." Since people are far more likely to come to a party than a meeting, Jeff asked participants to use the day's nine exercises to plan events that would be fun, creative, and energizing. In examples Jeff related from other groups, a trash-strewn, unsafe vacant lot was transformed when one woman started the "Grow, Granny, Grow Guerilla Gardener Squad" and created community gardens there. Another person, working in a town best known for its incredible mud season, created a tourist and charity bonanza when they organized "Muddy

Gras," complete with mud-pie bake-offs, a tug-of-war competition and the sale of jars of "organic" mud to tourists.

While Jeff constantly encouraged us to "think big but start small," many of the Summiters' ideas seemed to spring fully-formed. One group came up with an idea called "Get Over the Hump: Trans Freedom Hike" to support transgender awareness. They would raise funds by selling "Diversity Trail Mix: Beyond the Binary of Fruits and Nuts." Another group brainstormed a series of ice cream socials to encourage more people to build floats for the annual Pride parade: "Don't Split your Banana, Float Your Boat!" A victim advocate at SafeSpace, known throughout the day as "Hellraiser Hannah" hopes to host an event for rock climbers called "Harness Heaven." Well, what else could it be called if it's designed by a bunch of queers? ▼

*Many thanks to the Snelling Center for Government and the Vermont Law School Alliance for their support of Queer Summit VI. For more information on future Summits or "Harness Heaven" contact "Clowning" Christopher@ru12.org or "Hellraiser" Hannah@safespacevt.org.*