

# community profile

BY EUAN BEAR

**"T**he first time I went to a VCLGR Town Meeting, I was just wowed," says native Vermonter Virginia Renfrew, the chairwoman of the Equality Vermont board of directors (down to three members), and currently its most active and visible member.

"I had been married for two years when I was quite young, and I came out [as a lesbian] when I was 34. Within a year, I was going to the Town Meeting and got to be in a room with 300 people just like me. It was empowering, amazing."

Founded in 1986, VCLGR is – or was – the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which last year changed its name to Equality Vermont. And every few years, when the organization's visibility is slipping, we wonder about the group's who, what, where, and why. The fact is that although most of its activities happen in the background, the group is front and center in moving Vermont toward legal equality.

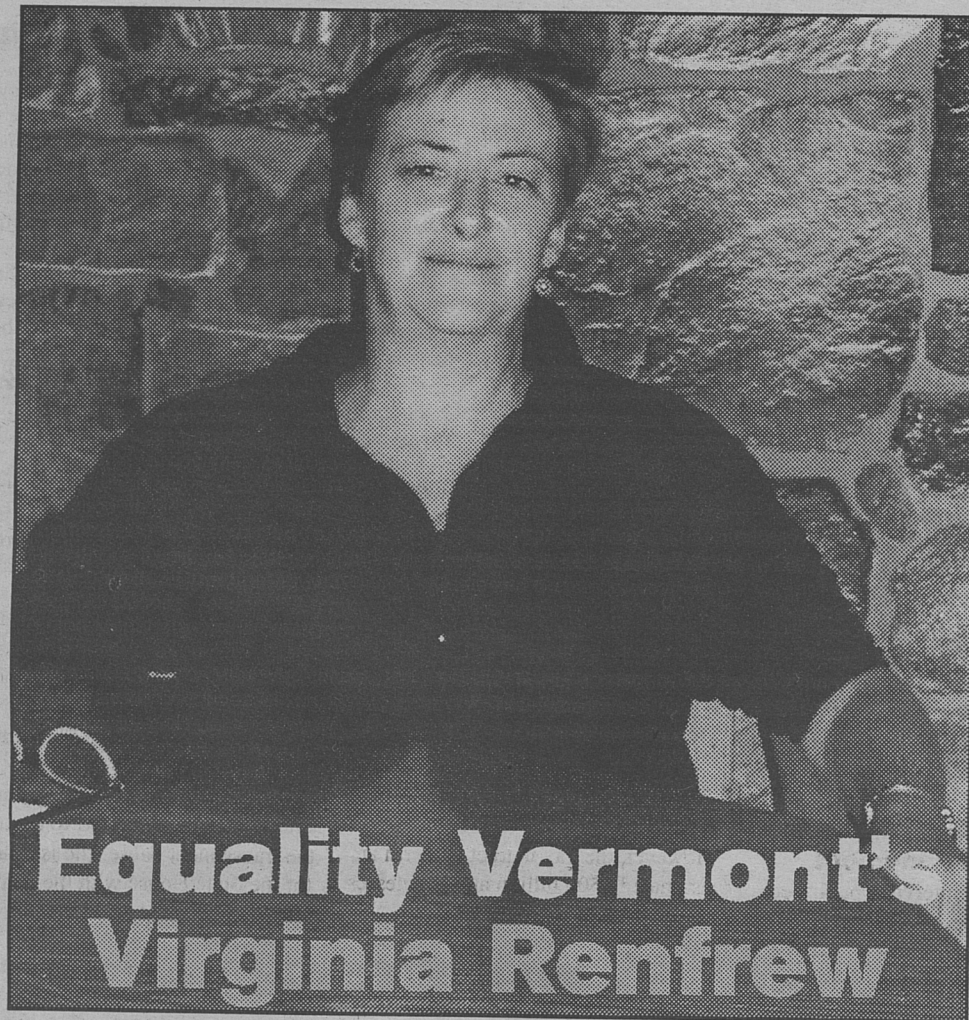
Renfrew grew up in Northfield, where her mother still lives. She tells the story of speaking on behalf of VCLGR a few years ago at a gathering at Goddard College. A local reporter quoted her – "out of context" she says – as "blaming straight white men" for discrimination against the gay and lesbian communities. Her mother saw the story and complained, "Do you have to be so public?"

Renfrew's answer now: "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I stayed in the closet so many years, I nearly destroyed my life. I don't want [any other] 12-year-old to go through what I went through."

What she went through was a sheltered childhood and young adulthood in which the possibility of her being attracted to women was never even considered. There are hints of what might now be called self-medicating behaviors. She worked a number of jobs, including stints as bartender, restaurant manager, and catering manager. We speak briefly about her notoriety during the Burlington Women's Council upheaval. But it's not easy to get Renfrew talking about her personal life: little else is forthcoming during our interview, except that she's single, and that she remembers vividly the acute pain of repressing her sexual identity before the joy and release of coming out into a community of queers.

But ask about legislation and you'll get a flood of information on what bills with an impact on the lgbtq communities are in the legislature, where they are in the process, and what their prospects are during this session. Tracking that legislation is one of Equality Vermont's tasks, and no other lgbtq organization here does it.

After that first Town Meeting, where she attended a workshop on marriage offered by attorney Susan Murray ("I saw the listing 'marriage' in the program, and I went because I was



Equality Vermont's  
Virginia Renfrew

curious – I had no concept of why that would be there at a gay and lesbian conference."), she joined VCLGR as a member. Then she got to know Keith Goslant, a founding member and the group's co-liaison to the governor's office, and went to two more Town Meetings. She ran for a seat on the board when board members were elected at Town Meetings.

The rest, as they say, is history – or in this case, "herstory."

Asked to describe her most powerful experience as a representative of VCLGR / Equality Vermont, first she says, "Making a difference for the lgbt community." Prompted for something more specific, she responds, "Working with Elizabeth Campbell on getting transsexuals in the hate crimes law. She put a human face onto the word transgender – and that's why working with her was so incredible."

Renfrew's paying job as a partner in the lobbying firm of Zatz and Renfrew keeps her in the legislature, which is why her knowledge of forthcoming bills and the politics and personalities that might speed or hinder their passage is so complete. The two business partners represent only nonprofit organizations with a focus on social service issues. Renfrew has two associate's degrees, one from Vermont College in human services, and another from Woodbury College, in paralegal studies. Before Zatz and Renfrew, she completed an internship at the Human Rights Commission and worked for the Governor's Commission on Women.

"I once toyed with the idea of running for office," she admits, peering out from under lowered brows. "But I don't think I'm a good game player." Faced with a laughing challenge to the idea that lobbying isn't political game playing, she insists, "No, the type of lobbying we do is different. Our job is to put a human face to a given issue, to humanize it."

She cites the "ping pong over medical marijuana" as an example of the legislative game. "The bill has been passed out of each chamber, then killed by the other" in recent sessions. Former Governor Dean was widely quoted as being adamantly against authorizing the use of marijuana for any reason without federal efficacy testing. Governor Douglas has so far indicated he is also unlikely to sign such a bill.

"S.76 [the "medical marijuana" bill] was passed by the Senate in a 22-7 vote [in the 2003 session]. In the House Health and Welfare Committee, however, the chair is not supportive. I hope that other members of the committee will insist that the bill be taken up. More than 70 percent of Vermonters support the issue," she declares. "And 100-200 Vermonters would actually use the law. But it would allow the people who do so to not be in fear of being arrested and locked up."

"Eight other states have [medical marijuana laws], and California is the only one with a problem with the federal government," she concludes. "The five states that regulate its use have had no problem. We need to separate

recreational marijuana from medical marijuana."

VCLGR had a long history of tracking legislation, providing liaisons to the Governor's office, offering anti-discrimination training to police agencies, sponsoring LGBTQ Visibility Day at the State House – and holding Town Meetings. Two years after its founding, VCLGR – which was then the "Lesbian & Gay Coalition" – helped pass two laws prohibiting discrimination against people with HIV. Two years after that, the group worked for the passage of Vermont's hate crimes law. In 1992, Vermont's anti-discrimination law was amended to include sexual orientation, which the Coalition counted as one of its victories.

The next year, 1993, the Coalition renamed itself the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights and held its first Town Meeting, an event that was held annually for six years.

Among other VCLGR accomplishments: helping to establish the Human Rights Commission (1991), domestic partner benefits for state employees (1994), the founding of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force (1995), the institution of Visibility Day at the State House (1995 to the present), keeping anti-gay language out of an adoption reform bill (1996), heading off various anti-gay marriage bills (1998, 1999, 2000), passage of the civil unions bill (2000), and defeat of the "nopromohomo" bill restricting the free speech rights of public school teachers to discuss homosexuality (2001, 2002).

There is also the addition of transfolk to the hate crimes law, the campaign Virginia – and it is *always* Virginia, never "Ginny" – Renfrew recalls as the most powerful experience she's had as a member of VCLGR.

So, what about that name change from VCLGR to Equality Vermont? The change has drawn comment and criticism in some quarters for obliterating the visibility of gays and lesbians. Renfrew explains that it became important to reflect the organization's concern for and commitment to all the communities whose stripes make up the rainbow flag, not only gay men and lesbians. So the group became Equality Vermont. Ten of the 64 statewide organizations listed as members of the Federation of Statewide Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Advocacy Organizations are Equality "X" with two more as "X" Equality; another two add "Network" to that. Seventeen other member organizations explicitly mention lesbian and gay or lgbt in their names.

Much of Equality Vermont's activity is behind the scenes, in committee rooms, in the governor's office, on the phone and online. But it seems clear that without this organization, lesbians, gay men, and transgenders in Vermont would not have the rights we now do. ▼

Equality Vermont's web site is [www.Equalityvt.org](http://www.Equalityvt.org). They welcome members and inquiries about board vacancies.