

Marriage Campaign Comes Home to Vermont

BY SUSAN McMILLAN

As the debate about gay marriage escalated nationwide, two local organizations held gatherings last month to strategize on how and when to push the Vermont legislature beyond civil unions to equal marriage rights. The Vermont Freedom To Marry Task Force organized a rally and forum, and the International Socialist Organization held a public meeting to discuss the issue.

Scores of people gathered at the top of Church Street for the Vermont Freedom To Marry Task Force Marriage Rally on March 12. Chanting gay rights are civil rights on the steps of the Unitarian Universalist Church, this group was in good spirits in spite of the disappointing set-back in Massachusetts the previous day, when the Massachusetts legislature passed an amendment to the state's constitution limiting marriage to one man and one woman while instituting civil unions for same-sex couples.

Leading the crowd outside, with WCAX Channel 3 recording the demonstration, Beth Robinson, plaintiffs attorney in *Baker v. State*, emphasized that the rally is the beginning of phase two, while attaining civil unions was phase one. The objective now, she said, is to win same-sex couples the right to marry in Vermont.

Inside, well over a hundred people listened to brief, focused remarks by some of the key players in this effort. *Baker* co-attorney Susan Murray spoke to rousing applause, briefly recounting the remarkable victories witnessed in Hawaii and Alaska in the 1990s, and in San Francisco, New Paltz, Portland, and New Mexico last month. Our opponents are scared to death, Murray exclaimed. Bush's exploitation of gays and lesbians as political fodder is morally reprehensible, she said to a chorus of boos and hisses.

Stan Baker, plaintiff in the landmark case, mentioned that his partner, Peter, was traveling in Maine. It is at these times, Baker declared, that I am acutely aware that a civil union is not marriage. When Peter is out of state, if something were to happen to him, our civil union means nothing.

According to Sherry Corbin of The Vermont Freedom To Marry Task Force, it is not time to demand marriage rights yet. We are not ready to go back to the legislature, but need first to gather every ally in the state. To that end, the Task Force will hold trainings throughout Vermont in April and May to focus on the language needed for the GLBT community to mobilize, educate others, and build the momentum needed to go before the legislature.

Across town earlier that week, and with a distinctly different slant toward

gay marriage, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) met on the UVM campus. More than 50 people attended the Separate Is Not Equal presentation by Nancy Welch, Associate Professor of English. A diverse group, including many student ISO members, participated in open discussion. The ISO, born in the late 1970s, has historically seen homophobia as a tool to divide the working class, and gay liberation as vital to overcoming capitalist oppression.

Members of this organization, which is not a political party, are not united on this issue. One common thread emerged: *Denial of marriage is state-sanctioned oppression. Liberation will strengthen our movement. We must oppose Bush. Period.* Building a coalition and working for a broad and united Left to achieve gay marriage in Burlington and Vermont is the immediate goal. A victory, Professor Welch told *OITM* later, would strike a blow against the right-wing assault on a full range of civil rights. Gay marriage isn't the revolution in and of itself, she declared, but homophobic oppression is one of capitalism's key pillars that we need to smash.

Many in attendance were of the same mind regarding corporate Democrats. The national Democratic Party, including John Kerry, said several attendees, is aiding and abetting state-sanctioned discrimination when it advocates a

civil union alternative and the codification of second-class status for gays and lesbians.

One woman questioned why the ISO should work for gay marriage when Marx opposed heterosexual marriage as a component of capitalist oppression. Others saw bourgeois marriage as an unhealthy institution and gay marriage as a white, middle-class issue, noting racism in the LGB community. Caitlin Daniel-McCarter, President of Free To Be GLBTQA remarked that while the discussion is framed as an LGBT struggle, transfolk have nothing to gain and are habitually excluded from the LGB civil rights movement.

Locally, a Defend Don't Amend petition has been circulated by the ISO, calling for the Vermont legislature to grant gay marriages. One afternoon, over two hundred individuals signed the petitions in an hour on Church Street. Plans to present the petition to the Burlington City Council and the state legislature have not been finalized.

David Zuckerman (P-Burlington) attended both meetings, and said that Vermont's civil union law is no longer seen as the high point. What was revolutionary four years ago is now the fallback position, as witnessed in the Massachusetts debate.

According to Zuckerman, It is time to create true equality. That can only be achieved by either including the GLBT in the Civil Marriage code or by including opposite sex marriages in the civil union statutes, and then giving the patriarchal word and event [marriage] back to the churches for separate ceremonies. ▼

Under the Same Roof

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VT Department of Health requires R.U.1.2? to maintain the VTM4M.net website, a health resource and referral service for gay, bisexual, and transgender men. After more than 3 years on the waterfront, R.U.1.2? Executive Director Christopher Kaufman sees the Elmwood Avenue building as "the ideal space for the next stage of our organization's development."

Moving into Burlington from their longtime home above the Toscano Café (formerly the Daily Bread bakery and café) in Richmond, *Out In The Mountains* staff will be in a smaller but brighter space on the second floor of 34 Elmwood. Although farther from activities in Montpelier and the southern part of the state, Mountain Pride Media will enjoy increased communication and cooperation with the many GLBT

organizations in town. Editor Euan Bear said, "I remain committed to increasing our communication with organizations and individuals throughout the state. *Out in the Mountains* will not become a Burlington rag."

The building is a classic three-story, nine-room, brick Victorian, owned by the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington. This is not the first time that the LGBT community has found a home on UU property. Just next door, at 30 Elmwood, is the sister building occupied by VT CARES in the early 1990s. That organization was forced to relocate temporarily after an arson attack on June 7, 1994. Following reconstruction, VT CARES remained on Elmwood Avenue until the summer of 1999.

According to a 1902 report in the UU Society's archives, both buildings were commissioned in 1901 and completed the following year. Each house was built at a cost of \$6,400. Gary Kowalski, the Unitarian Universalist minister, offered "I can say that the Society is delighted with our new tenants, and welcomes them to the neighborhood."

Just a moment's walk from the top of Church Street and 135 Pearl, this building will likely be a frequently accessed community center. A full, though compact, kitchen, meeting rooms, an art gallery for rotating exhibits, and lounge will make this a convenient space for informal meetings and community groups. Street parking is metered. There is one dedicated handicapped parking space, and the first floor of the building (and gender-neutral restroom) is handicapped accessible. The UU parking lot will be available for after-business-hours parking. ▼

