

BY DOT BRAUER AND EUAN BEAR

The first page inside the conference packet says it so simply, and yet the issue can profoundly shake up our understanding of the world and our places in it: Translating Identity is a free conference focusing on gender and gender identities. February 28, 2004 marked the second year that a group of dedicated UVM students associated with the undergraduate organization Free to Be planned and organized a substantive, successful conference. More than 350 people attended this year, traveling from as far away as Montana and Puerto Rico.

Clearly, issues of gender — what gender is, how it defines our lives, what happens when we don't conform to a prescribed gender role or identity, understanding gender options, making bodies match an internal gender — are of great importance to student activists on campus. It becomes of interest to the wider community as we await the outcome of a Vermont case where transman and former Hardwick police officer Tony Barreto-Neto charges he was harassed into resigning when his trans identity became known. The Attorney General's office conducted an investigation, and, according to a report in the *Caledonia Record*, settlement talks may be underway.

Further, a bill, H.366, is in the House Judiciary Committee that would explicitly add gender identity to the nondiscrimination law. The bill is not expected to move out of committee, but testimony on its merits could be taken toward the end of the session.

At the UVM conference, the two consecutive 90-minute morning sessions included Trans-what? for beginners, personal stories by female to male (FTM) and male to female (MTF) folks, and a session entitled SOFFA s: Agents of Change or Casual Leisure Furniture? SOFFA stands for Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies. Other choices included presentations or panels on trans youth, understanding gender and sexuality across cultures, trans sex, being gender queer, Sex at Work on nondiscrimination policies, and The Art of Bioterrorism, a reference to forced gender selection, not to agents of mass destruction.

Local author (and LGBTQ Services staff member) Eli Clare, presented *Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies:*

Telling Our Scars in the first of two afternoon sessions. Clare offered a moving analysis of the ways that oppression can alter and damage our relationships with our bodies, and used slide images to show how it is possible to reclaim the beauty and sexiness of marked bodies.

The other session was Finding Common Ground Through Trans Inclusion. In *Trans Inclusion*, Sadie Crabtree suggested there is common ground between advocates for trans liberation and those for reproductive freedom: the right to control our own bodies. In the same session, Elizabeth Green questioned the validity of separatist policies that have excluded transwomen from women-only space to maintain emotional safety for womyn-born-womyn. She suggested that

community should be addressing: poverty and prison reform. He began with a startling and compelling critique of the liberal, middle-class, white agenda of LGBT organizations, effectively securing the rights of well-off couples to leave their wealth to their partners, while ignoring the abuses suffered by impoverished, gender-variant people of all ages. For example, he said that progressive Democrats were wasting time and energy on partisan bickering, instead of developing alternative strategies for fixing welfare, because, as he pointed out, welfare needs fixing.

Spade wove a complex analysis of the intersections between class, race, sexual orientation and gender-identity oppressions as he laid out the conditions facing transgender people. Trans people

higher education because of fears about having to apply to schools and having their paperwork reveal their old name and birth sex because they have not been able to change these on their documents. Furthermore, trans people face severe discrimination in the job market, and are routinely fired for transitioning on the job or when their gender identity or expression comes to their supervisor's attention. In most of the US, this kind of discrimination is still not explicitly illegal.

The goal of *Translating Identity* is to help community members understand what has become a defining struggle in the lives of these scholars: what it's like to live beyond the binary of he and she: This conference seeks to translate gender identity to both the queer community and its allies.

The student organizers of the conference think many LGB folks have as much to learn about being trans as heterosexual folks do, and they may be right. Different generations take on different struggles. While gay men and lesbians are — after decades of difficult, painful, often tedious political and personal work — finding more and more acceptance by mainstream society, the new frontier appears to be in helping to erase barriers to the exploration of gender and its effect on our jobs, our healthcare, our families and our lives. As Riki Wilchins, last year's TIC keynote speaker, said, Gender affects everything. And, paraphrasing, homophobia is based on gender non-conformity.

The *Translating Identity* Conference has become a signature event for the UVM Free to Be GLBTQA. Members promise they will be hosting the third annual conference next year, despite losing the club's current president and vice president this May. President Caitlin Daniel-McCarter is graduating and heading for law school, where she plans to become an even more effective advocate for LGBT issues. Danny Robb, the club's VP, is heading home to finish out his degree in political science at SUNY Albany. He is already setting up internships at the Statehouse to help prepare him to run for public office so he can help make laws that protect the rights of LGBT people. ▼

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Understanding the T in LGBT

UVM's Translating Identity Conference Grows in its 2nd Year

lesbian feminism denies its own underlying premise questioning the gender dichotomy of male and female that defined and restricted roles based on genitalia. Green argued that separatists have retreated to a position that accepts the assumption they fought so hard against — that there are essential biological differences between men and women that separate them and are based in anatomy, unchangeable by any means.

A large and enthusiastic audience greeted the talk presented by keynote speaker Dean Spade, a young FTM attorney who started the NYC-based Sylvia Rivera Law Project on mostly his own sweat and inspiration. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine our gender identity and expression, regardless of income, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence.

Spade made a clear and passionate case for the issues he feels the LGBT

face enormous, and mostly unaddressed, discrimination in education, employment, health care, and public benefits. Many trans people start out their lives with the obstacle of abuse or harassment at home, or being kicked out of their homes by their parents on the basis of their gender identity or expression. A disproportionate number end up in foster care and corrections, or homeless after experiencing harassment and violence at the hands of staff and other residents in public facilities.

His theme echoed statements he made in a recent paper: The adult homeless shelter system, similarly, is inaccessible to them due to the fact that most facilities are gender-segregated and will either turn down a trans person outright or refuse to house them according to their lived gender identity. Similarly, harassment and violence against trans and gender different students is rampant in schools, and many drop out before finishing or are kicked out. Many trans people also do not pursue