

# Outright Vermont: The Next Generation Celebrates 15 Years

By DOT BRAUER

The name for Outright's fifteenth birthday bash in March could have been "Outright: The Next Generation." The whole second floor of the Firehouse was teeming with teenagers. A few of them wore white tee-shirts and bowties and circulated among the other 100 or so attendees with trays of hors d'oeuvres. I had to remind myself that these are the youth we could only imagine were out there 15 years ago.

Much of the "Roast the Directors" portion of the evening was polite, with the past and current directors thanking and complimenting each other. The room fell especially quiet when Outright youth took the floor. Ashley Warren, a UVM student and volunteer at Outright, brought tears to people's eyes as she told immediate past director BJ Rogers how much his support meant the day she found the courage to tell him the real reason she was at Outright (it wasn't because her brother might be gay, after all).

When BJ's turn came to be roasted, teens filled the room with cheers and applause. Past directors Tami Eldridge and Josie Juhasz were absent, but their good work was not forgotten. What was missing from a perfect roast were those past board members with embarrassing stories.

The auction was bigger than ever with a wall filled with gift certificates and several tables filled

the art, books, music and tschatchkies. Folks left with their arms full (their pockets a little emptier — to the tune of \$6500, meeting the fundraising goal for the event) and their hearts secure in the knowledge that Outright would continue.

**How Outright Vermont Began**  
San Francisco social worker Paul Gibson wrote in his 1988 paper entitled "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide" that "gay and lesbian youths may account for one third of all youth suicides and that homosexual youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers." Gibson's paper found its way into a federal task force report on youth suicide, and from there to an article in the October 24th edition of the *Washington Post*.

That article made it to the desk of David Landers. David and Howdy Russell had set up a meeting to discuss some grants they were writing for Vermont CARES, but turned their attention to the harrowing information contained in Gibson's report.

Howdy and David each gathered ten friends, Keith Goslant and Debra Kutzko among the 20 or so who gathered at the Addison County Counseling Center. They decided to start by renting a post office box and sending postcards to guidance counselors announcing the new address. David would check the box regularly and Howdy would read and respond to the mail. They learned about another Californian, a teacher near Los Angeles, who was

holding meetings for gay and lesbian youth in her high school. David called her and learned about her "One-in-Ten" project and about an organization in Maine called Outright.

Twelve of the 20 or so people from the earlier meeting journeyed to Paradox, NY, where Naomi Tannen hosted them for a planning retreat. Bill Lippert still remembers the sense of urgency. He's not sure who suggested that if each of them contributed \$100, they would have enough to rent the second floor room VT CARES had offered, at 32 Elmwood Avenue in Burlington, for a year. "People didn't even hesitate. They just pulled out their checkbooks." That is how, without grants or state or federal funding, Outright Vermont was born that night.

During the ensuing fifteen years, seven generations of staff and Board leadership have nurtured the organization and provided hundreds of trainings and workshops to educators, students and parents across Vermont. More than a dozen different staff members and scores of volunteers have facilitated hundreds of youth at Outright's weekly youth groups. Many youth have come out for the first time over the toll-free phone line. During the struggle over civil unions, anti-gay backlash threatened to shut Outright down, and once again community members came together, agreeing to dig deep to ensure the organization's survival.

Statistics gathered by the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey show the still existing need: queer youth in Vermont continue to be at much greater risk — as much as threefold in the deadliest risk categories — as their heterosexual peers. As for positive impact, Kate Jerman is just one example. Jerman, who first encountered Outright as a young adult looking for support, signed on as a program specialist and was promoted this spring to co-director, along with Lluvia Mulvaney-Stanak. Jerman and Mulvaney-Stanak are "The Next Generation," and they know exactly what they are doing. ▼

*Dot Brauer was director of Outright Vermont from 1991-1992. She is currently director of LGBTQA services at the University of Vermont's Diversity Center.*



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