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## Burlington Subaru

# Some Leaders Are Born Women

## Bernie's Forum Addresses Global Issues

BY LYNN MACNICOL

About 200 women – and a few men – attended a statewide women's forum on April 3. The day-long conference in Randolph included workshops on the effects of global trade on women's lives, human trafficking, health and economic issues, harassment in schools, and a course in government 101.

A panel of Vermont speakers – Lynn Vera (longtime Burlington lesbian feminist activist), Ellen Kahler (past director of the Peace and Justice Center), Jeri Martinez (domestic violence educator), Marjorie Power (Older Women's League), Peggy Luhrs (lesbian activist, past director of Burlington Women's Council), and Rachel Atkins (Planned Parenthood of Northern New England) – offered inspiring remarks about the tremendous changes women have made in just a few decades, and about the importance of continuing to work for equality and freedom.

Keynote speaker Gloria Feldt, national president of Planned Parenthood, noted that Vermont is one of the strongest pro-choice states and urged women to attend the March for Women's Lives in Washington April 25. She said funding for reproductive health care is half what it was 20 years ago, and many low-income women lack adequate health care. Feldt is the author of *War on Choice*, coming out this year.

Rep. Bernie Sanders, who sponsored the forum, noted the Bush administration's global "gag rule" which denies women receiving U.S. medical assistance the right to receive counseling about abortions, adding that women cannot receive abortions in U.S. military installations.

I attended two out of many workshop options: human trafficking and breast cancer.

### Human Trafficking

Amy Boldosser, of the Freedom Network to Empower Trafficked and Enslaved Persons, led a workshop about the prevalence of human trafficking and what is being done to stop it. In 2000, trafficking of persons was

defined for the first time by the UN Crime Commission and in the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Trafficking occurs in nearly every part of the world and involves the coercion of women, children and men to perform labor for the benefit of traffickers. While the Mafia is involved in trafficking, others are as well, including family and friends of the victims, business owners, and diplomats.

The victims work in most types of labor – not just prostitution or domestics – and come from all backgrounds. Many are poor or may be fleeing from social unrest or natural disasters. They fall prey to traffickers who promise to help them migrate but then take their documents and force them to work to pay off huge debts for their "assistance."

Under U.S. law, trafficking victims receive the same benefits as refugees. However, while 5,000 visas are available every year to assist trafficked persons, only 373 victims have completed the lengthy process, Boldosser said.

A recent article in *The Economist* suggests that the U.S. is soft on trafficking in countries that cooperate with this country in the "war on terrorism."

Boldosser said the media misleads the public into believing that all trafficking is for the sex trade. While that is true for about 30 percent of its victims, the remaining 70 percent are used for labor.

There have been rumors of males being sold for homosexual sex, and in one case a boy was kidnapped to be used for sex, she said. Boldosser said young gays and lesbians may be at greater risk of trafficking when they try to enter the U.S., where gender minorities have rights they don't have in their own countries.

### Breast Cancer and the Environment

Very little money is going into researching the prevention of breast cancer, agreed a panel of speakers – including Alyssa Schueren of the Vermont Toxics Action Center, Craig Wells of the Silent Spring Institute, state Rep. Kinny Connell of Warren,

breast cancer survivor Linda Revell of the Vermont Cancer Network, and moderator Ben Davis of Vermont Public Interest Research Group – while most funding goes to treatment.

Activists and scientists aim to change that as they search for causes of the rapidly increasing incidence of breast cancer. Suspected are chemical compounds that mimic the hormone estrogen, found in commonly used pesticides, shampoo, deodorant, sunscreen, flame retardants, plastics, birth control pills and hormone replacement therapy. Radiation is also a probable cause.

Lesbians get cancer more often than heterosexual women because lower rates of childbirth and nursing are risk factors. Lesbians also smoke cigarettes at a higher rate, increasing their risk.

Cape Cod has one of the highest breast cancer rates in the nation. The gay mecca of Provincetown has high rates as well, although not as high as other areas on the Cape. Pesticide use on cranberry bogs could be one culprit, but scientists are also examining drinking water and sampling indoor and outdoor air.

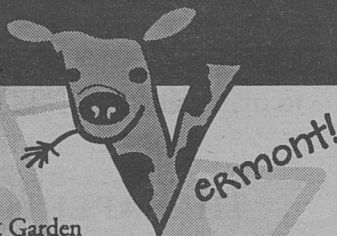
Activists founded the Silent Spring Institute in 1994 – named after Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which warned of pesticide use – to study the causes of breast cancer on Cape Cod. Carson died of breast cancer in 1964. At that time one in 20 women got breast cancer. Today one in 7 women gets the potentially fatal disease.

Vermont also has a high rate of breast cancer, which one participant suggested could be related to the state's nuclear power plant, Vermont Yankee. Linda Revell, president of Vermont Cancer Network, wasn't sure. She said of herself and 30 other Vermont women she knows who had breast cancer, all but three grew up in industrial areas in other states. ▼

For more information see [www.freedomnetworkusa.org](http://www.freedomnetworkusa.org) or [www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking), or call the trafficking hotline at 1-888-3737888. About breast cancer, see [www.silent-spring.org](http://www.silent-spring.org) or [www.toxicsaction.org](http://www.toxicsaction.org).

Lynn MacNicol lives in Burlington.

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