

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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A Place at the Table

Gay Men and Lesbians Increasingly Play a Role in Mainstream Politics. By Euan Bear



L & G movers and shakers: (l to r) Susan Murray, Rep.-elect Steve Howard, Progressive Martha Abbott, Rep.-elect Jason Lorber, Linda Weiss.

In the 2000 backlash election, more gay men and lesbians than ever before worked on political campaigns for politicians who had voted for civil unions. Many of us tried to defend the seats of the Democrats and Republicans who had stood by us, knowing the political risk they took by their votes. Seventeen of our allies lost their races that year.

And in that same election Robert Dostis, an out gay man, first ran for the House, won his race, and has been re-elected twice, joining Bill Lippert who was first appointed to the House to fill a vacancy in 1994.

The number of queers involved in elections increased again in 2002, with gay men and lesbians taking higher-profile positions.

In Orange County, longtime gay activist Bob Bland has been the county chairman of the Democratic Party since 2001, running unsuccessfully three times for the legislature. When he began, there was one Democrat representing the county. Now there are eight.

In 2002, Linda Weiss, an out lesbian who put aside her own intention to run for the legislature two years before, engineered the return of state Senator Mark MacDonald to a seat he lost in the civil union backlash. In the

Martha Abbott, Bob Bland, Robert Dostis, Ed Flanagan, Keith Goslant, Steve Howard, Jason Lorber, Susan Murray, BJ Rogers, Linda Weiss, and, of course, Bill Lippert: many of these names will be familiar, others not. They are some of the lesbian and gay movers and shakers in mainstream politics in Vermont. Some have been active in mainstream politics for years, while others could be said to be members of the 'Class of 2000.' I chatted with six of them – some before and some after the elections – about how and why they came into politics.

same year, Susan Murray, known for her work on *Baker v. State*, led the campaign of Claire Ayer to victory over anti-civil union incumbent Tom Bahr in Addison County. She continued that work this year as part of Sen. Ayer's "kitchen cabinet."

In the campaign season just past, BJ Rogers, the former director of Outright Vermont, signed on to run gubernatorial candidate Peter Clavelle's unsuccessful campaign. Jason Lorber of Burlington made his first foray into electoral politics with his run for a seat in the Vermont House.

Steve Howard, who has been in the House before (1992-1998) and was the Democratic Party chairman for a time, won back his seat, while also running the ultimately losing campaign of Cheryl Rivers for lieutenant

governor.

There are many more of us working out front and in the background in Vermont than ever before, no longer concerned that we will be rejected because of our sexual orientation, and more confident that electoral politics can work for us if we're there to make it work.

A More Welcoming Community

Linda Weiss has been in some ways a "behind-the-scenes" presence. She had been working in her community of Corinth well before civil unions became an issue. She was (and continues to be) a mail carrier and held seats on the planning commission and the school board. When attitudes toward civil unions divided the town, she gave up her plans to run for the legislature, but couldn't stay out of politics.

"The first training I went to was a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force training in Worcester, Massachusetts," Weiss recalls. There was one other person from Vermont. The training "opened my eyes wider and made it a lot more real. You learn a lot – you see what needs to be done, what can be done."

She then went to a leadership training in 2002 sponsored by Emily's List, an organization that raises money for women candidates, and in the meantime was on the Vermont Democratic Party executive committee, became the Orange County State Committeewoman and a member of the party's platform committee.

"I'm really a pragmatist," Weiss insists. "I'm usually capable of some level of compromise in order to get to some level of greater good. If the goal is to get enough people into the legislature to preserve civil unions, then we have to make some compromises. You don't talk about it [on the campaign trail], but people know about it anyway."

Her political involvement stems from "a deep belief and commitment to public service." She points to the schoolboard and the planning commission.

"I was a justice of the

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