

# A Place at the Table

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peace and very active." After the interview she and her partner gave to a reporter from *The New York Times* was reprinted in the *Montpelier Times Argus*, that was when the change began. "In 2000 when the shit hit the fan, I found myself in the middle of 'Take Back Vermont' land. People who had been friends and neighbors suddenly became very hostile. I withdrew my energy from my local community to focus on a larger, different, more welcoming community – ultimately the Democratic Party – with a short stop at the Freedom to Marry Task Force.

"It was a conscious transference, a choice to expend my energy for a greater good," Weiss concluded. "In 2002 I felt an absolute obligation to get [Orange County state Senator Mark MacDonald's] seat back. I felt I owed a lot of people in 2002. He [had] stepped up for me, and I was ready and willing to fulfill that obligation."

## Repairing the World

Representative-elect Jason Lorber comes from a different place, politically and geographically. He moved to Vermont in 2002 from San Francisco after graduating from Stanford with an MBA and having founded a consulting business. The focus of the business – nonprofits and healthcare – is part of a "public service" and "community building" approach Lorber identifies as driving his career. In addition, he has been active on nonprofit boards.

"Community building is part of our mission," Lorber explained in an interview. "And by that I mean making the world a better place. Strengthening the community. Working for civil and equal rights, for healthcare services, addressing domestic violence. It's important to do work that's socially responsible. I've chosen to use my degree to work on social issues, and I've donated my services at times."

Lorber went on to say that since the election he's "now on the Board of Directors of the State of Vermont. I'm getting paid for it – but not at my usual rate." He sees electoral politics not as a leap from community activism, but a logical extension. "I'm continuing to advocate for issues that concern me. It wasn't like one day I woke up and said, 'Oh, I'll enter politics.' All choices have potential political consequences. I'm working for *tikkun olam*, repairing the world."

## Born Political

Steve Howard and Keith Goslant are both long-time veterans of the Vermont political scene.

Howard came out while in office (in 1997), and Goslant attained local office in Plainfield as an out gay man from the beginning of his tenure as a justice of the peace and a selectboard member who became the defacto "mayor" of Plainfield as chairman of the selectboard.

Goslant, of course, is one of the founders of what is now Equality Vermont – a Statehouse 'insider' organization that tracks bills affecting the LGBT communities. He has been the LGBT communities' co-liaison to the Governor since Madeleine Kunin held that office. He co-founded Vermont CARES and worked on the passage of the measure to include "sexual orientation" in the list of protected classes in the anti-discrimination bill and to include transgender individuals in the Hate Crimes bill. He was almost born political.

"I grew up with Goddard College in our backyard. Goddard had a queer dorm in 1972!" He credited his political confidence to his supportive family and the home-grown acceptance of his town. "Good or bad, I was their native son. There could be a lot of anti-gay language, but not when someone started using it about 'our own.'"

He recalled that founding the AIDS organization "came from radical politics – we were going up against mainstream agencies that weren't meeting our needs."

Goslant, who works at the Vermont State Hospital, remembered that after he had been appointed as co-liaison, "I used to go to the legislature when I had time off and pick a committee. I'd go sit in a corner and watch all the legislators shuffle their papers and look at me and sit there wondering what was the gay issue in the bill they were considering. The legislature was just a larger platform. I wasn't becoming part of mainstream politics, I was confronting mainstream politics."

Steve Howard of Rutland likewise grew up with a political bent. According to an *Advocate* article about him as the youngest state party chair in the country in 1997, Howard started campaigning – for Madeleine Kunin – when he was 10. In 1986 when he was 14, he campaigned for Senator Patrick Leahy. "Politics is not new for me," Howard declared in a recent interview.

"Civil unions might have raised the energy to be more directly involved," he mused, "but however it has happened, it is a welcome phenomenon." When we spoke – before the elections – he said Vermont is actually behind other states in having a politically organized and involved LGBT community, citing

Massachusetts as better organized.

What Vermont needs, he said, is a solid political entity whose endorsement would be sought after because it would mean something in terms of getting volunteers to work on campaigns. Asked about a potential Vermont chapter of the Stonewall Democrats (a national political organization), Howard said it would help, "no question."

It was no extra pressure to run a campaign for Cheryl Rivers, he said, because of her solid support for gay issues. "I wouldn't work for a candidate that it was a problem for."

## Progressive Politics

Progressive Party Chairwoman Martha Abbott of Underhill is another old hand in the political struggle, although until the last decade, much of it might not be classified as "mainstream." In a phone conversation, she was careful to draw a distinction: "I'm in politics and I'm a lesbian, but I'm not in politics as a lesbian."

The comment was typical of the care with which she chooses her words. She characterized herself as "over-prepared," and insisted on at least beginning the conversation by email because "I'm much better at writing down what I want to say."

She "became involved with electoral politics in 1970 through the student and anti-war movements. A group of people in Vermont were forming a third party (Liberty Union) as an alternative to the two major parties" which were beholden to what was then called "the military-industrial complex" – that era's Halliburtons. She was the first woman to run for governor in Vermont, and the ticket included Bernie Sanders in one of his first statewide races.

"I was 24 and I thought I knew everything," she laughs. "It's harder to [run for office] now because you're more aware of the enormity of everything." She wasn't out to herself then. She came out in 1976. "When I came out, it was the most natural thing in the world."

Both of her parents were lifelong Republicans when she joined Liberty Union. Her father remained one until he died, while her mother "went straight from being a Republican to being in the People's Party."

Abbott served four years as a Progressive on the Burlington City Council in the 1990s. She was elected chair of the Progressives in 2001.

The problem as she sees it is "How do you get people to not be hoodwinked into voting against their own self-interest? You have to reach people on all the [moral values and economic] issues at once as a package deal without letting the values issues be used against you."

Why is it that none of the media has conveyed the idea that "marriage is a very conservative institution," she wonders in thinking about the effect of the gay marriage bans

approved in the election. "I hope that in this country over the next ten years, the choices of gays and lesbians [whether to marry or not] will be less of a hot-button issue."

Likewise, for Vermont, "I hope that over the next ten years Vermont will become fully a three-party state."

## Fighting a Gay Rights Enemy

Susan Murray has the support and affection of Vermont's lesbians and gay men for her role in *Baker v State* and in getting legislation that recognizes our relationships for all state-bestowed rights, benefits, and responsibilities. She also earns points for engineering the defeat of a virulently anti-civil union 12-year state senate incumbent in favor of Claire Ayer in Addison County two years ago. Ayer was comfortably re-elected this year.

"The backlash election of 2000, she said, "awakened the community to the realities of politics. We lobbied the politicians very hard [to get civil unions passed], and the politicians were expecting us to support them. All the gay and lesbians citizens active at the State House became active in campaigns." Some of that activity was fund raising to the tune of "several hundred thousand dollars."

The political action committee that grew out of Vermonters for Civil Unions "funneled both money and volunteers to campaigns, and in 2002, some politicians continued to ask us for help. By then some of our volunteers had become quite politically savvy," Murray remembered.

"I worked for Claire to help rid the legislature of a gay rights enemy," Murray declared. And now, "The gay community has awakened. We're not just a single-issue constituency. We are working at a grassroots level."

This year, Murray worked on campaigns less formally in "breakfast meetings, strategy sessions, on fundraising and mailing postcards. It helps to have had a broad range of experience in the law, in lesbian and gay legal issues," such as adoption rights, "and to have a historical perspective."

There's "less ghettoization" of issues, Murray suggested. "Health care is important, as is marriage equality, and that affects tax policy. We care about the environment. Our issues are broadening and 'mainstreaming.'"

"Of course civil unions were a big deal in 2000, and a lot of closeted or otherwise quiet gays and lesbians came out – in public! Once you've done that, there's no reason to stay quiet any longer."

There are active lesbians, gay men, and transfolk at every level of politics – from schoolboards and justices of the peace to town councils, mayors, legislators and eventually the governor's office. I suspect we carry that "fairness gene" with us, influencing those with whom we work. And that is what will help us survive the next four years. ▼