

R.U.1.2? Gets Serious About Health

HIV Grant Funds 'Health & Wellness' Position

By Ric Kasini Kadour

R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center in Burlington hired a Health and Wellness Coordinator in March. The new position will oversee programs that promote and build community around the health of gay men, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender people.

"What we're trying to do is put a lot of focused energy to creating a community that cares about the health of the

whole community, but also about the individuals in the community," said R.U.1.2? Executive Director Christopher Kaufman. The Center will develop programs addressing HIV, tobacco, women's health, and cultural competency among care providers.

Health programming at R.U.1.2? is not completely new.

"We've had health care programming at the center for pretty much its entire history, going back to the first year when the Vermont Diversity Health Project (VDHP) was started

here," Kaufman insisted. VDHP works to identify and train queer-friendly health care providers and publishes the resource guide *Our Bodies, Our Minds*.

Last year, the queer community center took over VTM4M, an internet outreach program that focuses on HIV prevention. Center staff identified as "peer outreach workers" spend time in online communities and chatrooms to offer information and support for men. R.U.1.2? also partners with Vermont CARES to offer HIV

testing.

R.U.1.2? had not taken a comprehensive approach to health in the past. Limited resources and staffing prevented

the organization from addressing policy issues, creating partnerships with other organizations, and participating in the larger, national queer health movement. In January, the center applied for and received an HIV-prevention grant from the Vermont Department of Health that funds the Health and Wellness Coordinator position.

In March, Kaufman hired Shawn Lipensky (see sidebar). Lipensky will oversee an expansion of the center's pro-

"It's a new position ... The majority of the stuff is going to be HIV prevention, education, outreach."

Shawn Lipensky:

Health and Wellness Coordinator

As the lead person on R.U.1.2?'s health programming, new Health and Wellness Coordinator Shawn Lipensky's got quite a job ahead of him.

In the first few weeks on the job, Lipensky has been meeting with community and government agencies. The funding for his position comes from a Vermont Department of Health HIV prevention grant; thus a significant focus will be implementing an outreach program based on the peer-opinion-leader model developed by the University of Wisconsin called Diffusion of Effective Behavioral Interventions, or DEBI for short.

Briefly, the DEBI model involves a trainer identifying community

leaders and teaching them specific skills and techniques for discussing and encouraging safer-sex behaviors among their peers. Part of the grant will pay for training Lipensky in the model.

The 30-year-old actor earned his B.A. in theatre from American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City and has been living in Burlington for three and a half years.

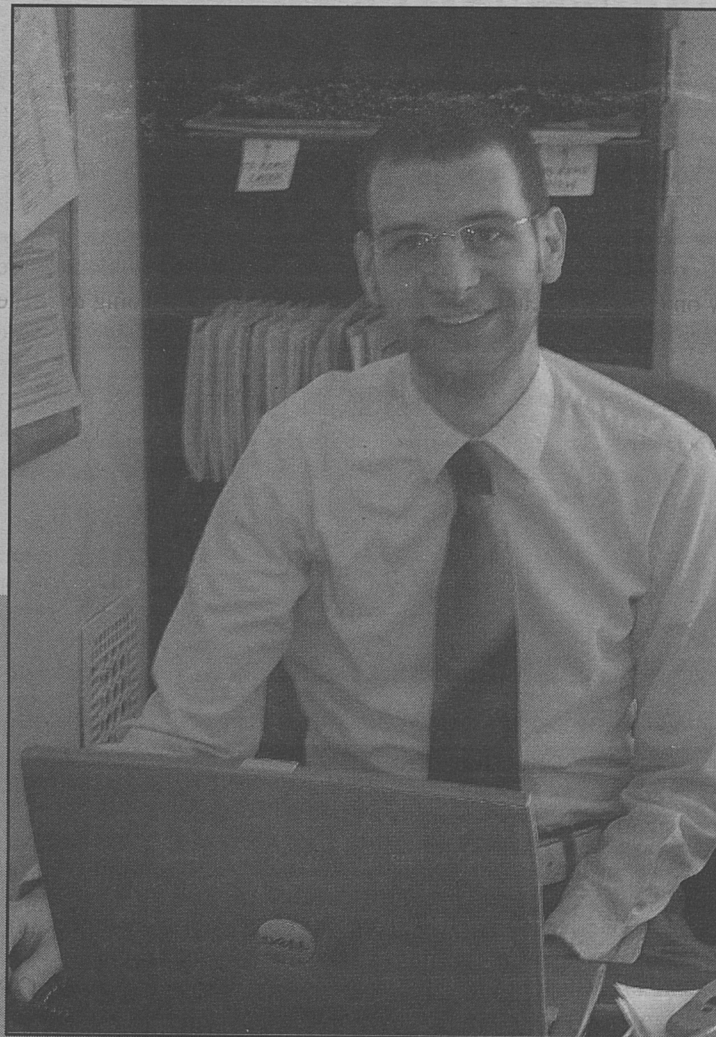
"I came from New York City, where I was a performer in musical theater. I was doing a lot of sketch comedy and some short films and things like that," said Lipensky. "I still do a lot of that stuff here. I just get to do it more on my own terms." He is currently working on two different shows: a live stage ver-

sion of *The Breakfast Club* and the *Spielplatz Kabarett*.

Health programming is a new thing for Lipensky, who is experiencing a steep learning curve while attempting to meet program goals set by funders.

"I just had to jump in," he said of his new job. "Balancing everything is a big chore right now. I want to be able to meet the needs of a lot of different people."

His biggest surprise so far has been just how far Vermont has to go on improving queer health.



"I thought people were more educated on gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, just in queer health issues," he said. "There's still a lot of homophobia out in the medical world."

Lipensky is in a committed relationship with *Seven Days* Art Director Don Eggert, who co-founded R.U.1.2?. ▼