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# OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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## PRIDE SHINES THROUGH

more photos inside (see pp. 16-17, 32)

### This Is A Hate Free Zone: Plattsburgh's Response to Fred Phelps

BY CYNTHIA POTTS

You can still see the signs everywhere. In coffee shops and bookstores, auto parts stores and insurance companies, black and white placards announce "Hate Free Zone." It was a message the Reverend Fred Phelps and the members of his homophobic Westboro Baptist Church didn't want to see.

After learning that Phelps was planning to come to the Champlain Valley to demonstrate at the annual Mayor's Cup Festival, community members, led by Amy MacLeod and Rebecca Leonard, came together to form Plattsburgh for Peace.

"As soon as people heard that Fred Phelps was coming," said Sara Dean, of Plattsburgh, "I felt that we needed to make sure that it was obvious that wasn't how Plattsburgh feels. That Phelps doesn't reflect our values." Dean was instrumental in per-

suading her Baptist church to support the message of Plattsburgh for Peace.

"This was truly grassroots Plattsburgh," MacLeod said. "There's never been a movement with such a variety of volunteers. People really came together to say 'We don't want this in our town.'"

"Plattsburgh for Peace had definitely taken the stance that we didn't need Phelps to come here. We didn't want to give him the attention. So when he first arrived on Saturday, we deliberately didn't make any appearances," MacLeod explained, delineating the group's strategy.

"St. Peter's brought tears to my eyes. They made a huge quilt-style banner that said 'Stop Hate' and hung it two stories up on the front of their church. Then to see Mayor Dan Stewart and his partner Jon Recor walk hand-in-hand into the church? It gave me goosebumps." Once the couple got inside the Catholic church, the congregation stood up



The Plattsburgh For Peace Booth at the Mayor's Cup Festival focused months of volunteer grassroots work creating a Hate-Free Zone.

and cheered, MacLeod recalled. "You would have thought they were rock stars."

"Unfortunately, there was a lot of counter-protesting at Trinity Episcopal," MacLeod said. "The community needed to get it out of their system. There was a lot of

shouting back and forth." One potential incident was quickly contained by law enforcement. "Phelps's people never looked happier than they did at that point."

McLeod continued, "But the

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