

By EUAN BEAR

“We did everything backwards,” laughs Robyn Maguire, recounting how she came to Vermont just three months ago. “First we bought our house, and then we looked for work.” The “we” is Robyn and her partner Naomi Freedner, who has been winding things up in Massachusetts before finally reuniting their lives in Winooski.

And fortunately, Maguire didn’t have to look very far for work, finding the timing just right for her to take on leadership of a re-activated campaign for marriage equality with the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force. She is also working part time for the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence. Those two areas mesh well with her background: she’s been working with the Massachusetts Freedom to Marry Coalition as its director of field development and training since before the Goodrich decision, and prior to that, spent two years at Elizabeth Stone House, a women’s shelter.

Her accent doesn’t show the years she spent growing up in Pasadena, Texas, whose claim to fame is “Gillie’s,” the bar where *Urban Cowboy* was filmed. Maybe that’s because her parents moved to Texas from Worcester, MA for work. After graduating from the University of Texas in Houston with a degree in journalism and public relations, she made her way back to Massachusetts and extended family.

When the Vermont legislature passed its civil union law in 2000, “I wanted to move here then!” And five years later she’s here. Much of the work she did in Massachusetts, she says, was based on learning about Vermont’s campaign for marriage and then to retain the compromise of civil union. “I can’t imagine just how hard it was to be breaking new ground, to be having a dia-

Hate-Free Zone

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second day, it was all peaceful and quiet. People turned their backs on Phelps.” Instead, they were visiting the Plattsburgh for Peace booth. “We were completely overwhelmed. We had to empty two donation cans every twenty minutes.” The group was offering wristbands for Mayor’s Cup attendees to show support for the cause, “and we could barely keep up. But we went through the information even faster.”

Plattsburgh for Peace distributed a Hate Survival Guide, as well as tip sheets for schools and businesses on how to create hate-free zones, and research materials for teachers. “We had a lot of parents picking up the sheets,” MacLeod said, “and many teachers from out of state who wanted to bring the materials back home.”

“That’s probably the most

important part,” said Tierney McKee, an educator from Fairport. “When parents and teachers actually sit down and talk with their kids - even if they themselves aren’t gay, aren’t comfortable with gay people, whatever - they’re reinforcing the message that hatred is not okay and violence is never an option.”

Between donations and the pledge-a-minute fund drive, Plattsburgh for Peace raised over \$8,000 to be split among five charities. The Interfaith Council’s Hospitality Network received \$1,778.50. The Interfaith Food Shelf received \$2,237.50. \$2,072 is going to the Matthew Shepard Foundation, and another \$1,425 to the Aids Council. And the Southern Poverty Law Center is getting \$1,115. Donations came from all across the country, funneled through the Plattsburgh for Peace website.



Ahead of the Game

VFMTF Field Director Robyn Maguire Elevates the Conversation

logue no one was used to having,” Robyn adds, sitting in the OITM office.

“But now it’s five years later. People know our faces. They can’t demonize our families in the way they did then. People know what same-sex couples look like, that we care about our communities,” she continues. “That places us in a much better position.”

The fact that Vermonters have been through the process of discussing civil unions and facing and expressing their fears - no matter how painful that process was - puts us

“ahead of the game.”

The job now, she says, is to “elevate the conversation here in Vermont, to really talk about marriage.” She acknowledges a diversity of opinion in the gay and lesbian community about marriage. The real point is not whether every couple would choose marriage, but whether it’s available as a choice, in the same way it is for straight couples.

“It’s not just about the word marriage, but a whole sweeping range of benefits and rights. It is only fair for us to be recog-

Phelps’ group had planned to stay at the Mayor’s Cup until seven or eight in the evening. “They’d scheduled a picket for 6 p.m., which is prime time at the Mayor’s Cup,” MacLeod said. “But then they switched to an afternoon picket, and they were 20 minutes late for that. They skipped their evening picket entirely. But their comment to the media was that they were ‘bored with the Champlain Valley.’ That tells us everything we need to know.”

“I’m really proud of our town,” said Erika McKinstry, a Plattsburgh resident who attended the Mayor’s Cup. “Maybe people’s minds are opening up, and they’re ready to accept people who are a little bit different from themselves.”

Transforming Plattsburgh into a hate-free zone took hundreds of volunteers countless hours of effort. Photocopying, folding literature, and cutting stickers for distribution kept volunteers busy for days.

The financial situation was

similar. “We didn’t have any large donors,” MacLeod explained. “Everything we needed we literally built with tiny donations. More people said, ‘I’m sorry I can’t do more,’ as they pressed a crumpled \$10 bill into our hands. But our bucket was literally filled entirely of tiny drops.”

“We wanted to reach out to everyone,” MacLeod explained. “Rebecca Leonard called every church in town, and attempted to meet with every one of them face to face. The vast majority agreed to meet with her, and supported our message. At one church, she did have to deal with a guy who spent two hours trying to ‘save’ her, but once they listened, they supported the cause. Another church told her that they agree with Phelps, just not how he’s spreading his message. But once you have that conversation, you’re starting the steps toward a hate free zone.”

The anti-hate effort bore fruit in unexpected places. “We saw networks being formed that never would

nized in all these matters.”

Robyn and Naomi might know something about that. They just got married on June 25 in Massachusetts, a “shotgun wedding” of sorts. That is, they realized that once they moved to Vermont, they would not be able to marry within the United States - at least until the *Cote-Whitacre v Department of Health* lawsuit is resolved. That lawsuit involves eight couples from outside Massachusetts who were either denied licenses to marry there or whose marriages were ruled invalid because of a 1913 law called the “Reverse Evasion Act.”

“When Naomi and I decided to move to Vermont and began thinking about a family, we realized we would have to get married before we left. There were all these milestones in our relationship that were being compressed. I actually felt some resentment at having to make that decision and squeeze that into a three-month period. [Without the move,] we would’ve waited another year and a half to get married,” Robyn explains.

That’s a very personal example of “discrimination dictating what we could and could not do.” The government should get out of the business of discrimination, she declares, the passion she feels about the issue unmistakable in her voice and body language.

“At a speakers training for the Freedom to Marry Coalition I met Ralph and Paul, who had been together 48 years. Ralph’s family didn’t quite ever accept them as a couple. Now that they were aging, Paul told me, he wanted to share their story publicly because without marriage, he wasn’t sure he would have the right to claim Ralph’s body at a hospital.” She shakes her head in amazement at the many small and large and intimate ways that marital status affects our lives.

“I am extremely committed to this work. How marriage discrimination affects our families is very harmful.

“I want us to win.” ▼

have been formed,” McLeod said with awe in her voice. “I personally saw people I’m used to seeing on the wrong side of the sidewalk at Planned Parenthood, that I’ve escorted patients through, coming to keep Phelps’ poison out of our town. And I sat down with them, and thanked them for coming.” The Plattsburgh Democratic and Republican parties signed a joint letter of endorsement of the group’s activities.

McLeod credited nearly everyone’s efforts but her own. “We couldn’t have done it without the youth in the area. They were the ones that made the stickers and wristbands cool. They were so eager to participate in this. They actually did the activism and saw it work. That means when another situation comes up, they’ll be likely to try it again. And those are tomorrow’s voters.” ▼

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