

## COMMUNITY PROFILE:

# Jay Schuster: Not Your Average Queer Computer Nerd

BY EUAN BEAR

WINOOSKI – When you see Jay Schuster, the image that comes to mind is not “computer nerd.” There’s no pocket protector, no glasses, and no white shirt and tie. Instead, there’s a black beanie that matches his full moustache and beard, a tee shirt and rust-colored canvas Carhartts. If you catch him in summer, there are tattoos and time spent at Faerie Camp Destiny in southern Vermont. Between seasons, there’s the leather biker jacket to go with a love of motorcycles (he and his spouse have a Yamaha).

What you don’t see is the stereotypical buttoned-down image of a cofounder and vice president of a computer company with more than 40 employees that specializes in software and training to help doctors manage their practices. But that’s where images are deceiving, because that is what Jay Schuster does.

The company is Physician’s Computer Company (although it started out as “People’s Computer Company” not long after Burlington became known as the “People’s Republic”), with offices in the Mill in Winooski. Largely through Jay’s influence, the company has been a benefactor to LGBT nonprofits, among other projects and groups.

“John Canning [the other still-involved co-founder] and I knew each other in high school,” Jay explained in a recent interview. “We were in Explorer Scouts together.” Schuster grew up in Essex Junction, IBM sponsored the Explorer Post, and his dad was the scoutmaster, so it was perhaps inevitable that he would be involved in computers early in his life.

The friends’ first project was to computerize a pediatrician’s office in South Burlington in 1983. “The lesson there was ‘there’s no such thing as a summer project,’” Jay recalled. At the end of the summer, Jay went back to his senior year at Cornell, John returned to RPI, and the two worked on vacations. “That was when 300 baud [per second] was a fast modem, but the long distance charges were killing us.”

Undaunted, they tackled their second physician’s practice in 1984, just after Jay’s graduation. By the next year, they

had three more doctor’s practices as clients while the friends finished grad school. “And it just grew from there. I’ve basically been doing the same thing for 23 years,” Jay grinned.

For the geeks, PCC’s programming started out with Unix and is now Linux-based. Even for clients networking as few as three or four computers, the key is keeping that network secure. “All it takes is skipping a security update or downloading a screensaver from the Web, and you’ve got a virus or somebody in Romania is using your computer to send porn,” Jay explained.

The company took on different programming tasks at various times to keep the venture afloat: accounts receivable for a publisher, a radio fire alarm system for the Pine Bluff (Arkansas) chemical weapons arsenal, inventory and accounts for a women’s clothing wholesaler. “We found out that consulting wasn’t really what we were good at or what we wanted to do, so we remarketed ourselves as the Physician’s Computer Company, and specialize in practice-management software.”

Their system covers everything from making appointments to billing insurance companies, to tracking the financial health of the practice, to identifying when each patient needs to be called for another appointment. “After 23 years, we have more experience than some doctors. We help negotiate with insurance companies about their reimbursement rates.”

Jay does programming and system administration. He is not a people person.

“The job can be stressful – in that clients call us when they need help or are frustrated – so we try to create a fun work environment. And it keeps us in toys.” He laughed, and then admitted, “I’m probably the most Luddite of anybody here. I’m the only one that’s not working on a laptop.”

Jay Schuster and spouse Dan Berns were united in civil union in early August of 2000 at Faerie Camp Destiny during the Lammis celebration. The Faeries’ annual play that year was “a very campy” *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Jay was cast as Theseus, Dan as Hippolyta. “At the end of the play everybody gets married, and really it’s the boring part of the play. They were going to end [our ver-



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sion] before then. Dan and I were just going to go off in a corner of the woods for our ceremony, but then the Faeries found out and they segued [the play] into our handfasting.”

Dan, who is HIV-positive, has been a volunteer in working on sexuality and HIV prevention with queer youth through Outright (see “Hometown Hero,” *OITM* October 2004). “I met Dan at a party in Burlington the night before Christmas Eve 11 years ago. I actually met two guys I was interested in, and one had an email address. That was Dan.”

Jay said his sexuality is not an issue at work. “I hate coming out to people. I’ve had the same job for 23 years, so I

haven’t had to figure out whether to come out in a job interview.

“Some clients know, some don’t, some I wouldn’t want to know. Some clients are ridiculously conservative, like American Family Association-conservative. I have this internal debate about how much to closet myself. When I was single it was easier. Now that I have a partner I can’t really make small talk about my life without saying ‘we.’ A bunch of clients know about Dan and his illness. He used to take photos at our user conferences, so we’d identify him as a ‘PCC spouse.’ So I guess I’m in the ‘constructive engagement’ approach rather than ‘in your face.’”

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