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**COMMUNITY NEWS**

# Mikhael Yowe is Mr. Empire State Leather 2006

Mr. ESL is a Vermonter — Again

BY CHRIS ILSTRUP

**O**n April 1st, 2006, Williamstown, Vermont resident Mikhael Yowe was crowned Mr. Empire State Leather at a competition at Club Phoenix in Albany, New York. The contest, hosted by the Stars Motorcycle Club, is described as being like the coming-out parties or graduation ceremonies held by the nonleather world. The contest is a step on the way to more leather contests and titles and is a test of the contestants' character and spirit.

Twice in the last three years, a Vermonter has held the title of Mr. Empire State Leather. Bill "Furby" Cross won in 2004, and Mikhael thinks that we keep winning because "we come from the heart, and we're just us." Mikhael feels he didn't just give them what he thought they wanted to see. "I was just me," he said. "We just do it, no hype, no crap; [We] just go out and do it."

I was able to speak with Mikhael recently about his title.

**OITM: What does leather mean to you?**

MY: Leather is about getting in touch with my masculinity. It's the feel of it, the weight on my shoulders and the clink of the metal on the harnesses. It's like mad Max and the terminator all rolled into one, without the violence.

**OITM: How much leather gear do you own?**

MY: Not enough. You can never have enough leather. I have found a little leather shop in Barre and they will be seeing a lot of me.

**OITM: Can you describe yourself - in and out of leather?**

MY: Out of leather I'm just one of the guys, maybe a little on the redneck side, but I like that look on me, and it feels right. In leather, I'm a super male. I feel like a super hero fixing to go out and save the day. I'm more serious in leather and I'm sexier. I don't laugh and joke in leather like I do when I'm dressed in jeans and flannel.

**OITM: What happens at Empire State Leather?**

MY: The competition begins Friday night where the contestants

have to go out and meet and greet everyone in the bar. This can be a little daunting if you're kinda shy, but I don't seem to have that problem.

Saturday around noon, the judges interview the contestants. You have to know things like who the last title-holders were from the major competitions and you better know the leather protocols. Some of the questions are funny and some are serious. Saturday night is when you present yourself to the crowd. There is formal wear and a speech followed by your sexiest self. Then you play out a fantasy on stage for entertainment.

**OITM: Why do you feel you won?**

MY: Truthfully, I thought that I had gotten third place. They brought out this smaller trophy - the ESL Brotherhood Award - and the MC said it was like the Ms. Congeniality award. I was happy and excited for the other two guys, until they named me as Mr. Empire State Leather for 2006. I was absolutely speechless - which was a first for me.

**OITM: What other competitions will you be going on to and how are you preparing?**

MY: I will be going to the American Brotherhood Weekend in April to watch the competition and support the 2005 Empire State Leather Boi. Learning the ropes at the bigger competitions is always a good thing. I will certainly be getting my leather and my brain in order for next year. It goes with my title. They won't force me to compete but it is expected.

**OITM: What's your goal as Mr. Empire State Leather?**

MY: I want to bring all the factions together: leatherbears, leathermen, straight leather and the young trans men and women. There is no difference between any of us except what we create amongst ourselves. Up here we are scattered and isolated from the bigger cities and each other. We need to support each other.

**OITM: You're a charter member of The Green Mountain**



PHOTO BY DAN FERLAND

**Leather Club. How do you see your title helping the mission of the new organization?**

MY: The Green Mountain Leather Club is an all-inclusive group. If you're into leather then you will fit in with us. We want people to understand that there is more to leather than BDSM. To us it's about having a support network and a place to hang out with friends. We also want people to see that we are people from every walk of life. Leather seems scary to some people so we want to demystify it. I have to get the title out there. It has to be seen and I'm going to make sure that it is.

**OITM: You also identify as a bear and as transgender. How do those identities work with your leather identity?**

MY: It is hard enough finding your identity in this society. For a long time, I identified as a lesbian. I was into leather but back then it wasn't very popular in the lesbian scene. Once I took the plunge into transitioning, my leather went on the back burner. My need to reconnect with the leather scene came back full force, once I understood more about myself and being transgender. I'm a bear: big, hairy and laid back. I think it's more of an attitude, though.

Being transgender has been a lifelong journey for me. I've driven trucks for most of my adult life, but finding myself as a bear and a leatherman is a recent thing. In searching for my place in the masculine world I have found three of the most masculine realities out there. For me, they fit like a glove. ▼

➔ You can learn more at [www.starsmc.com](http://www.starsmc.com) and [www.greenmountainleather.com](http://www.greenmountainleather.com) and you can contact Mikhael Yowe at [mresl2006@greenmountainleather.com](mailto:mresl2006@greenmountainleather.com).

➔ Chris Ilstrup, 31, is originally from Minnesota and has been living in Vermont for five years now. He currently lives in Hinesburg. He is a charter member of The Green Mountain Leather Club.