

COMMUNITY

Brattleboro Men's Program

Participants Share Experiences

BY JASON WHIPPLE

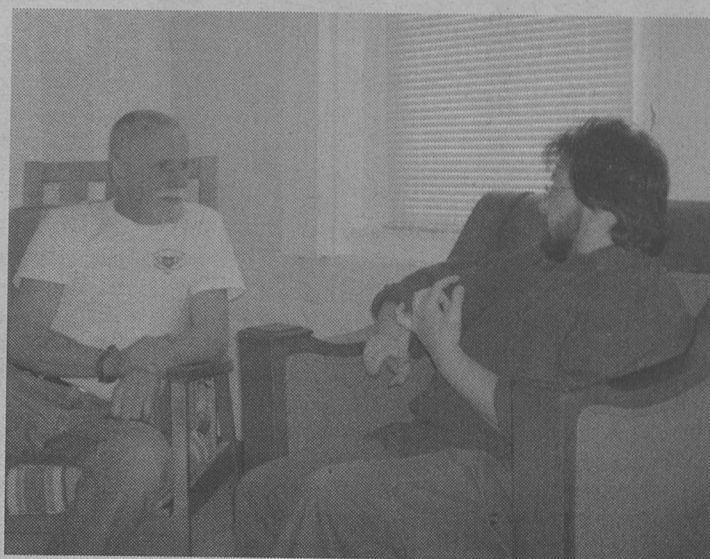
In the May issue of *Out in the Mountains*, Alex Potter and Howie Peterson shared their thoughts about their roles as coordinators of the Men's Program. This month, I had a conversation with Thom, Brad and Tom - three men who have connected with other men as a result of the efforts of the Men's Program. Thom, a 54-year-old man who came out at the age of 36 and lives in Rowe, Massachusetts, is an active Tibetan Buddhist and helped to begin the Spiritual group that meets monthly. Brad, a 50-year-old man who has owned his own landscaping company since 1982, lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Tom, a 54-year-old man who is a special education teacher and member of a local Congregational church where he serves as the chair of the Board of Deacons and the Safe Church Committee, lives in Orange, Massachusetts. Let's hear what they have to say.

Jason: Hey guys, thanks for coming. So, what is your involvement with the Men's Program?

Tom: In 1994, I became a volunteer with the Men's Program and a buddy to a man living with HIV. From 1999 to 2004, I was employed part-time by the Men's Program as the newsletter and events coordinator. Currently, I serve as a member of the Core Group - a grassroots group of guys who get together monthly to plan Men's Program events. Alex and Howie are also part of the Core Group.

Thom: I began participating with Carrie Johnson from the very first efforts he made to start reaching out. It is a joy to participate with [the Core Group] - it's very creative and even fun, not to mention that there's a wonderful potluck at every meeting.

Brad: I've been involved with the Men's Program for about two years. First as a participant in activities, but eventually I became passionate about reaching out to all men and giving them a place to be themselves - whatever that may be - and be around others



Don't be shy. Be in touch. Get connected to the Men's Program by checking out *The Source* on page 30. PHOTO: JASON WHIPPLE

who accepted them as such.

Jason: What type of impact do you think the Men's Program has had on the men's community?

Thom: I very much enjoy the flow of events and participate for the enjoyment of being with such a fine mix of guys. I appreciate the strengthening of the gay community and how it reaffirms my comfort being a gay man; I see it constantly touching the lives of isolated bi and gay men in a very nurturing way. Just sitting in a restaurant enjoying a meal with other men is such a transforming experience for so many rural, semi-closeted men - it really changes their outlook.

Tom: My involvement helped attract men to the program and made them feel welcome. Peer outreach and social networking helped create norms around safe sex because gay men became active members of their community. The program is also a social alternative to bar-hopping, obsessive cruising and isolation. I'm glad to be a part of that.

Jason: What do you think the men's community needs to become a stronger community?

Thom: Just looking at the new participants and members of the Core Group shows how much the Men's Program is expanding across the stratum of the population. There seems to be a depth in the folks up

here I very much appreciate.

Brad: I am constantly trying to challenge the status quo to make sure the Men's Program is making it very clear that we accept all men - regardless of their label or self-descriptions.

Tom: The men's program needs more community involvement. This year, we got funding to rent our own space separate from the offices of the AIDS Project. That helps because it eliminates the stigma many men feel about having to go into the AIDS Project building to participate in the Men's Program. To be stronger, we need guys to turn out regularly and in greater numbers and we need sustained federal, state and local funding to keep on going.

Jason: Is there anything else you'd like to add that you feel is important to share?

Brad: I feel strongly that the men's community needs more organizations like the Men's Program who are out there tirelessly trying to help all men. The men's community must stop putting such strong emphasis on animalistic, unemotional sex.

Thom: I think the addition of new participants will shift the community into its next evolutionary stage.▼

➔ Jason Whipple was previously an editor of *Out in the Mountains*. He lives in Brattleboro.

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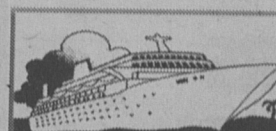


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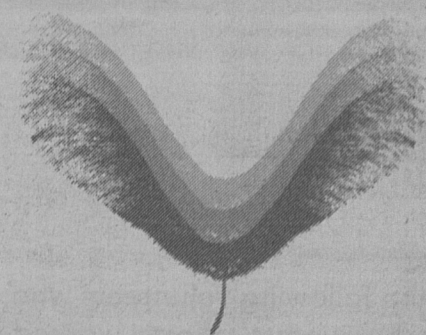
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