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ACTIVISM

Sherry Corbin: Changing People's Lives

BY BENNETT LAW

t the 8th Annual Queer Community
Dinner in May, Sherry Corbin of South
Hero was named the 2006 Volunteer of the Year. Sherry was recognized for
her leadership with the Vermont Freedom to
Marry Task Force and with TransAction, a
group advocating for an end to discrimination
based on gender identity and expression.

Sherry's path to this recognition began in

in a long path to fairness, the marriage movement is further evolved. "We've been doing education about marriage for the past 10 years," Sherry said. "It's actually been very hard for us at TransAction because the queer community is used to being further along. This experience feels somewhat out of step with the rest of the movement. We believe that ending discrimination in gender identity should be a no-brainer, so to see the discomfort the general public has with this issue has been difficult. We don't really



Sherry Corbin

PHOTO BY LYNN MCNICOL

1999, while volunteering for Champlain Islanders Developing Essential Resources (CIDER, Inc.), which promotes independent living for seniors in Grand Isle County. Her interest there was in changing people's lives, and Sherry quickly found a new opportunity to do just that when she volunteered to serve as a county coordinator for the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force (VFMTF).

The timing was fortuitous: just a year later the entire state was involved in the debate about same-sex marriage that precipitated Vermont's civil union law. Sherry spent long hours going door-to-door in Grand Isle County - not one of Vermont's more progressive areas - to educate people about the substantive issues motivating the drive for same-sex marriage. As county coordinator, Sherry made sure that at least three letters in support of marriage equality appeared in the local newspapers every week, and set up speaking engagements for same-sex couples and their families. She also kept the Task Force board aware of upcoming community events in Grand Isle County.

It was her experience in public education that Sherry was able to contribute to TransAction. Sherry joined TransAction as a representative of the VFMTF, eager to share her experience in speaker's training and at the Statehouse during the civil union debates in 2000.

While both the Freedom to Marry movement and the drive to end discrimination based on gender identity are fundamentally about fairness, Sherry sees these two issues at very different positions in the maturity of the movement.

"The trans work that is happening right now is about securing the protections of being designated a protected class," Sherry said. "This simply reflects where our culture is today. Ending discrimination is hard because you can only advance as fast as the majority - the masses - can handle. It takes time. As with marriage, progress will be made in single steps."

While TransAction is at just the first step

Sherry remembers when talking about being gay in Grand Isle County was almost impossibly hard, and so she remains optimistic about the evolution of acceptance of transgender Vermonters.

encounter this same awkwardness in conversations about sexual orientation anymore."

Sherry remembers when talking about being gay in Grand Isle County was almost impossibly hard, and so she remains optimistic about the evolution of acceptance of transgender Vermonters. "So many of us - particularly those who came to Vermont after passage of the civil union law - don't remember what rural Vermont was like before the civil union stuff. For those of us working as advocates for gender identity, it remains pre-2000 in rural Vermont."

The work that remains ahead for Trans-Action was made resoundingly clear by the Governor's veto of the gender identity non-discrimination bill earlier this summer.

"It's unbearable that the governor vetoed this law - but in his own way he made our point for us: we still have to educate people that its not OK to discriminate," Sherry said.

So while there's work ahead for TransAction, marriage equality remains a crucial concern for Sherry. "Our seniors in the queer community are in trouble financially because we don't have access to the rights that others do. We don't have access to Social Security, which imposes an unacceptable hardship on people when they are most vulnerable, such as at the death of a partner. We don't have access to immigration rights. We don't have access to government spousal pensions or tax-free inheritance rights, because all of these benefits depend on marriage."

This work clearly energizes Sherry. "The marriage movement has been fun," she said. "We are making monumental change. We are changing people's lives, and that's what I've always wanted to do."

Bennett Law lives in Bethel, and serves with Sherry Corbin on the board of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force.