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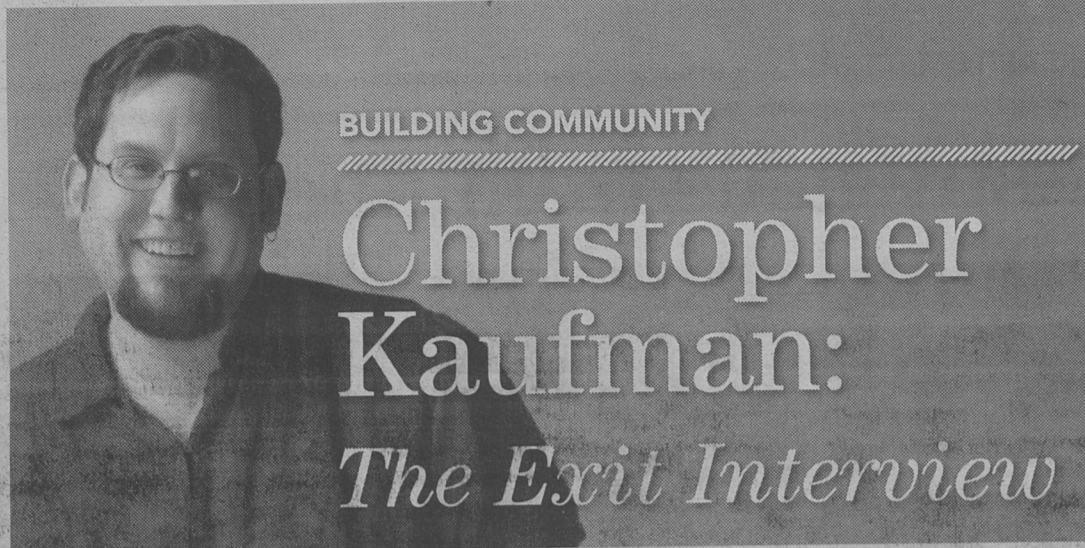


PHOTO: JORDAN SILVERMAN

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Christopher Kaufman:
The Exit Interview

BY MARK MELCHIOR

BURLINGTON - On August 4, Christopher Kaufman left his position as founding Executive Director of the R.U.1.2? Community Center after four years in that role. During his tenure, Christopher oversaw a dramatic expansion of the center in serving Chittenden County's LGBT community, and in its statewide advocacy on behalf of Vermont's "queer" community.

This fall, R.U.1.2? will merge with SafeSpace, and will become more closely affiliated with Equality Vermont, a political lobby organization focusing on LGBT issues.

Shortly before he left, I sat down with Christopher to discuss his role in R.U.1.2?'s development; the challenges of queer community organizing and fundraising, and his own personal journey through it all. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Mark: Give us a sense for how far R.U.1.2? has come since you were hired as the founding Executive Director, by telling us some of your earliest memories of the organization?

Christopher: As I think back on those early days, I'm really struck by how genuinely grassroots it was, and how much passion we felt in creating something new and exciting. It really pulled people into the queer movement who had never been involved before. These were not the elders of our movement who led the charge. It was younger people I'm thinking of [names] who have since become elder statespeople of the next generation and involved widely in the queer movement.

And I remember the enormous amount of resistance, too, that came from within the community. I heard many times, "this isn't something people want," "you'll never be able to raise the money," etc. And we proved them wrong.

Mark: What did you say to people then - and what do

you say today - when you hear, "I don't think we need a community center. I feel very integrated into my community."?

Christopher: I say the same thing now that I said back then: "The people who need the community center are the people who work on it." The people who created R.U.1.2? created it for themselves because they felt something was missing.

I think it's probably true that many people may not need the services that we offer. They may have good friends and a supportive family network. There are many people in our community who don't have those same resources available to them ... maybe they are just coming out and don't have the supportive friend and family network in place, maybe they have less disposable income for socializing.

Mark: Looking back, what were two or three decisive events that brought the community center to where it is today?

Christopher: I think the first would have to be the Gill Foundation grant that we got in 2000: It came after a very difficult year for several of our board members who had done a lot of work and were struggling to see how to keep things going. The grant was a wonderful validation for the work that had been done to that point, and more than anything, it said we value rural communities, which was important for all of us to hear at that time.

I think the next big watershed moment was when we were able to develop our relationship with the Department of Health and were able to demonstrate to them that yes, we are able to doing public health work in the queer community. That relationship has been built up over time, with small grants here and there. We were commissioned to create a guidebook for health care providers around LGBT issues, for instance. This has led to us doing a full-fledged health pro-

gram here, which involves HIV prevention, tobacco cessation programming, mental health screening and providing assistance to health care providers in LGBT-friendly care. The Health Department work was a substantial step in getting us to the point of developing our infrastructure and moving into our own building.

The third "moment" I would pick is the Dialogue Project. [The Dialogue Project brought together artists and longtime activists and elders in the LGBT community to tell their stories in new forms such as music, poetry and painting. For a long time we were seen as the new kids on the block and that wasn't, frankly, always seen as a good thing. We needed to do a lot of relationship-building with people who were not us, a younger group of activists and organizers, and the Dialogue Project helped R.U.1.2? build networks and bridges to other groups in the community (...). We had strong statewide coverage in the media which was also important for us as we began to organize around the gender identity bill which was the first LGBT specific legislation passed in Vermont since the civil union legislation.

Mark: With these strides in the development of the Center, have you seen a corresponding response in terms of support from LGBT identified donors?

Christopher: I think one of the big challenges in the coming years for the Center is developing a strong base of individual support for the Center's activities. Start-up funding is easier to get than funding which sustains over the long term. Foundations want to see sustainability in the organizations they fund, and the best way to show that is through community support. ▼

Mark Melchior of Guilford, VT is the departing Chairman of the Board at the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont. You can reach him at marmel@sover.net.