

Herstory Happened in Kindergarten *and It's Still Happening*

➔ Progressive Jean Szilva Makes a Bid for the Statehouse

BY JUDITH RUSKIN

Jean Szilva is running for the House. That's very good news for us! For one thing, according to the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, there are only 24 openly gay state legislators in this country and just nine of them are lesbian out of 7,461. Yes, it would be nice to raise the numbers. Yet even more exciting than numbers to me is a candidate who truly comes from the point of view that there must be equal rights and representation for everyone.

Jean's motto for this campaign is "New Ideas Bring New Solutions." She is running from Winooski and the portion of Burlington that borders it - Chittenden 3-6. However, her presence in the legislature would be an enormous support in representation for us all. That motto of hers, which is so simple and so obvious, works very well for the LGBT community. The "new idea" part is right on because who we are seems continually to be a "new idea" to the forgetful and sleepy mainstream. The "solutions" part is the "work in progress" that we have all been forging individually day by day, and also the work for which we have been collectively creating solutions for decades.

Our community has been in the forefront of grassroots activism. We have had enormous milestones in exterior change, to name just two: the Vermont Human Rights Law and civil unions. We have come a long way, also, in our internal growth and our visibility. Nevertheless, we still have many more needs and solutions to marry them to on the road to equality. During this national political administration and during this politically conservative epoch worldwide, we are facing threats to our human rights. We need more representation to effect lasting change.

I asked Jean how far back her activist roots went. Her answer:

"I remember in kindergarten that only the boys could play with the blocks. We girls had the playhouse and dolls and the gender-appropriate toys for which we were groomed back then. But there was no way I wasn't going to play with the blocks. I loved building things! When it seemed my teacher was adamant on

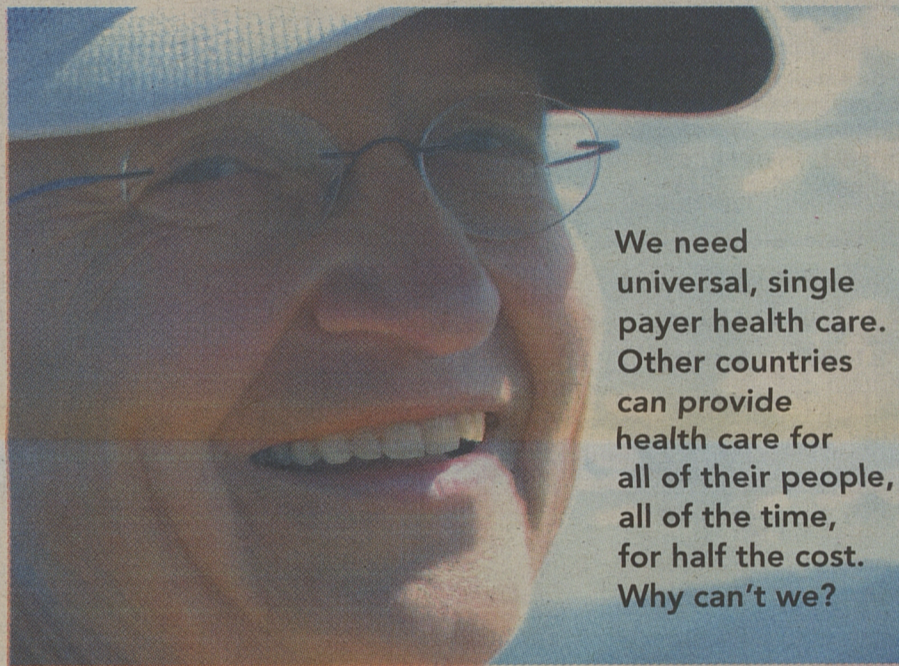
the issue, I just walked out. I left kindergarten and headed for home. It was the principal that ran after me and brought me back to school. That principal was smart enough to see that neither my teacher nor I were going to budge our positions, so he switched me to a different teacher whose politics fit mine. This new teacher believed we all should have equal access to the blocks. So my basic position on things hasn't changed that much since kindergarten. I believe we all should have equal access; to health care, education and to following our dreams."

Thus began the successful academic and political activist career of Jean Szilva. Presently, she is a teacher at UVM Medical School. An example of her exuberant teaching style is that she can be found playing hockey on roller blades with her students or bringing the contrast of humor to the seriousness of the Gross Anatomy class that she teaches. She is a teacher who has jumped right up on the lab table next to a cadaver to show her own varicose veins as an example to the students. She knows the healing importance of the belly laugh as an antidote to student burnout. For this and so much more, she is very well loved by her students.

As a former physician who had her own medical practice, Jean has the understanding and zeal necessary to help move along a universal health care plan for Vermont that will work, and to also fund research for alternative therapies.

"We need universal, single payer health care," Jean said. "Other countries can provide health care for all of their people, all of the time, for half the cost. Why can't we? A single payer system can cut administrative costs from 30 percent to five percent by reducing the amount spent on administration."

Jean continued: "If we had publicly funded universal health care, our country would be more interested in finding cures, discovering new effective treatments instead of just profitable ones. Now the pharmaceutical industry has control over what is funded. We need to take this out of their hands and put it in the hands of scientists, health care providers and citizens. There might be some simple solutions to some diseases for which there is no research because



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of the greed of the pharmaceutical industry and the biotechnology industry which are primarily motivated by profit, not good health. To them, simple solutions would simply not be profitable."

Jean ran for and won a seat on the Winooski school board in order to understand the system of taxation in her town. She is a very active member of that board.

"The education tax is difficult to understand, but the bottom line is that lower income homeowners pay a higher percentage of their incomes in education than higher income homeowners," Jean said. "If we had fair taxation, we'd have enough money to take care of our kids and our schools. Let's get rid of the education property tax and raise money for our schools based on ability to pay."

When Jean discovered that other citizens didn't understand the tax system either, she created clear, computer Power Point presentations and offered the information to others, including people of low income, nuns in the convent, to wherever she was welcomed.

I think this ability to take complex issues and make them accessible to all is one of Jean's most valuable as-

sets. Perhaps it comes from her years as a teacher. It certainly comes from her passion for people and social justice. Wherever it comes from, I believe it is a skill that can move people to support her and move legislation that is truly for the people and away from the greedy hands of big business.

It's been a long time since I was excited about the possibility of change towards more human rights and equality; it's been a very long time since I've wanted to pitch in and make something happen that had the potential to actually redirect things. There are two other candidates running for state representative from Winooski: incumbent Rep. Kenneth Atkins, and Winooski Mayor Clement Bissonnette, both Democrats. It's a very competitive race for which Jean could use support. Here is a woman who can represent us very well and empower us to use the community's strength with a focus on the Statehouse.

Here is an opportunity to make herstory in Vermont. ▼

➔ Judith Ruskin is a hopeful Winooski citizen.