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BUILDING COMMUNITY

Queer Social Space Vermont Builds Community

Part 1: Queer Rural Community

BY LESLIE FREEMAN

Vermont's LGBT communities have reached a critical bifurcation point - a sort of historical crossroads - between conditional acceptance into a broad, socially liberal culture, and development of explicitly queer cultural identity.

The public face of assimilation - like the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force, the staffs of queer nonprofits, and the club scene - is white, middle class, and able-bodied. Moreover, it is predominantly

In order to move forward, queer Vermonters must ask who we are, whether we are or want to be part of queer communities, whether we are or want to be accepted as individuals who simply happen to be queer.

In the 1970s and '80s, queer public spaces emerged in rural Vermont, which drew upon the energy of alternative lifestyle communities, formed by young transplants from more urbanized states. Unlike urban queer scenes, Vermont's queer culture flourished outdoors, in nature, rather

than in smoky bars. Though a series of short-lived gay bars operated in the Burlington area, queers congregated at Red Rocks for picnics and nude swimming. Gay men from a variety of class backgrounds enjoyed cruising near Richmond, where a guy who lived under the radar could both reconnect to his queer identity and find sympathy for his heterosexual marriage. Lesbians gathered at beaches, parks, and campgrounds, as well as at private homes, for potlucks, dances, and conversation.

Some Vermonters were inspired to create permanent sanctuaries for queer men or women to work and play in

harmony with nature. These spaces continued to grow stronger as the club scene faltered.

HOWL, a 50-acre sanctuary, campground, and intentional community near Huntington, was established around 1986 to provide space to women. Though the rugged mountainside was originally purchased by a private benefactor, HOWL is now the trust of a seven-member collective, and home to four care-keepers. It includes a farmhouse with common areas and living quarters, plus a barn with two small apartments.

According to Glo Daley, who has lived at HOWL since 1989, the land has provided refuge to women, has hosted women's cultural and spiritual events, and remains open to all women. Any woman, who agrees to strictly nonviolent communication, may stay at HOWL for up to two

weeks, with children, including boys under ten. The collective has no policy on trans inclusion; dialogue is welcome.

Faerie Camp Destiny began in Northfield in 1993, as a household collective inspired by Harry Hay and the national Radical Faerie movement, to provide sanctuary for faerie gatherings, as well as living space for a core collective. Since then, Camp Destiny has expanded to include 150 acres in Grafton and 16 acres in Chester. Throughout these changes, Bambi, Camp Destiny's historian, describes Destiny as "a refuge for queer healing, a resource for networking and socializing in a real place (versus the Internet) as well as building community through common tasks and shared visions."

Though the Radical Faerie movement is rooted in gay men's traditions, Destiny embraces a diverse queer community, and actively struggles to combat sexism and transphobia, as well as ageism and ableism. Indeed, Destiny is currently building accessible cabins, a kitchen, and a caretaker cabin. Bambi offers a broad invitation: "[L]et your sexuality and gender become part of what's fey in you. It will be difficult but true liberation is... You will find allies as we all come into faerie space hoping to be seen as being capable of magic."

The successes of HOWL and Faerie Camp Destiny, which share the values of independent, multigenerational community and ongoing dialogue, indicate that Vermont can support, and even nurture, queer space. ▼

QSS MISSION STATEMENT

In August, OITM reported on a series of activist conversations about queer visibility, safe space, and social opportunities. Since then, Queer Social Space Vermont has evolved into a multigenerational, community movement toward independent, queer social space in the Burlington area. We do not accept that assimilation represents progress for Vermont's diverse LGBT population. We are committed to establish a worker-owned coffee house, by queers and for queers, with the following goals: to provide safe, creative space in which to explore and nurture queer cultures, values, and connections; to provide entertainment and media resources that reflect queer lives and communities; to provide visibility in Vermont's commerce and social structures; and to celebrate our differences.

male. The most vulnerable members of Vermont's LGBT communities - people whose genders don't conform to homonormative ideals, people of color, people with dis/abilities, people without health insurance, queer elders and queer youth - have been struggling to cope with increased isolation since the mid '90s.

As Glen Elder, an expert on cultural geography, notes, many working class, dis/abled, and of color queers (who may be stealth, closeted, "on the down low") have no contact with queer community except via social services, which they may be reluctant to access because of a tacit power differential between themselves as "client queers" and their queer providers. Queer space should not only provide safety and visibility, but define queerness both in relation and in opposition to the broad public sphere.

➔ If you would like to become involved with our projects, please contact qssvermont@gmail.com or visit us online at www.qssvermont.blogspot.com. Queer Social Space Vermont's interests include local music, hot sweaty dancing, intelligent conversation, and strong coffee. We would love to hear from other LGBT folks who feel underserved or under-represented by existing resources.

➔ Leslie Freeman is a dis/abled femme dyke, mama of two, writer and activist who lives in Winooski. She is also a coordinating member of Queer Social Space Vermont. Leslie can be reached at efemmera@yahoo.com.