

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

# Queer Town Meeting:

## Building Community in Southern Vermont

BY LINDSAY COBB

An edgy hustle-bustle permeated Brattleboro's American Legion Hall in the half-hour before Queer Town Meeting was to begin. The tables were set with plastic-ware, questionnaires, butcher paper, and crayons. The penne pasta, tomato sauce, salad, cookies, coffee, seltzer - all either donated by local businesses or provided and prepared by volunteers from Windham County's Queer Community Project - sat waiting on side tables. The easels, the microphones, all were ready. But would anyone show up?

The answer soon became abundantly clear. Certainly you recall that line from the film *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." It was better than that. They came, about 100 strong, and began the work of building GLBT community together.

Queer Town Meeting was the brainchild of the Queer Community Project, a yearlong fact-finding venture funded with grant money from The Unity Project. Under the direction of an advisory board headed by local massage therapist Adrienne deGuevara, QCP has hosted house parties and other meetings with local GLBT folk in order to discern their needs and develop programs and services to meet those needs. Queer Town Meeting was a culmination of these smaller meetings.

As Mark Melchior, a member of the advisory board, explained to the crowd in some introductory comments, "We wanted to get together with a large group to talk about some of the things we learned in small group discussions, and to maybe, in a big groupthink, come up with some definitive points of departure for the next stage."

Melchior introduced deGuevara, who detailed concerns that people voiced in previous small-group meetings: isolation from the community, support for GLBT parents, fostering diversity, co-sponsoring events with non-queer groups, mentoring youth, claiming a cultural presence, educational outreach, accessibility to seniors and differently challenged people, and

the need for a resource center for legal and health referrals.

Zeeb, another member of the advisory board, explained the various questionnaires: one to list various interests and programs that individuals would like to see sponsored, and a third to be used as a contact and pledge card. "Our vision," she explained, "is this is going to be community-supported with volunteers and maybe

seemed particularly desirous of a drop-in center, a safe space to hang out without fear. Other folks cautioned that a physical space would be difficult to maintain until other elements, like volunteers and funding, were firmly in place; although, when it came to obtaining money, granting agencies were more likely to help fund a physical space for youth.

DeGuevara stressed the need to organize and work

**One of the prime topics was the purchase and maintenance of a physical space and drop-in center, a place to hold events and for housing resources and archives. Youth seemed particularly desirous of a drop-in center, a safe space to hang out without fear.**

some funds, and so this is an opportunity for you to tell us what you are prepared to do to help move this vision forward." Zeeb explained the proposed budgets, ranging from a bare-bones minimum of \$10,000 a year, to more than double that for a center and meeting space.

After people had a chance to eat, socialize, flirt, and discuss the issues that QCP had put before them, it was time to reconvene to hear people's suggestions and concerns. The format was done "Oprah style," as people around the function hall spoke into a portable microphone. This turned out to be the most fruitful part of the evening, as people tossed out ideas and wrestled with issues. Suggestions included developing a carpool for events, organizing a joint Brattleboro-Bennington festival, and fundraising for sign-language interpreters at events (one was, in fact, present at Queer Town Meeting). Talk was punctuated by much encouraging applause and laughter.

One of the prime topics was the purchase and maintenance of a physical space and drop-in center, a place to hold events and for housing resources and archives. Youth

to make these things happen. "We don't have any funding, we don't have a grant writer, the initial grant from the Unity Project is getting smaller, and the need to organize funding and people to do the work is important," she said.

As for an alternative name for Queer Community Project - one that doesn't include the word "queer" - sentiment seemed to be divided. Zeeb said that QCP would address the issue at a later date. Suggested alternatives included names using words like "pride" or "gay." (This reporter's personal favorite, suggested by a woman at his table, was Friends of "Tinky Winky.")

As the evening drew to a close, Melchior and Zeeb explained that the next task for QCP's advisory board was to collate the information they received that evening, and then contact people, connect them with one another, implement the suggested events, programs, and fundraising, and continue the work of building queer community. ▼

➔ Lindsay Cobb serves on the advisory board of the Queer Community Project in Brattleboro.

## What will your legacy be?

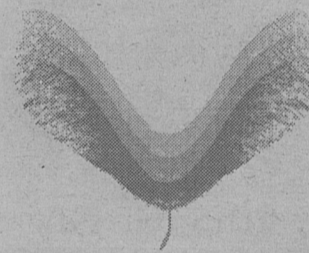
You're the kind of person who wants to make a difference during your lifetime.

You can also make a difference after you're gone.

Samara is a community foundation — a public charity created by and for people who share a common concern: to improve the quality of life in their community. In Samara's case, the community is Vermont's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens.

The Samara Foundation of Vermont gives individuals a place to make charitable gifts specifically to strengthen Vermont's LGBT community — both now, through annual giving, and in the future, through their wills and other estate plans. Samara links community capital and resources to social action.

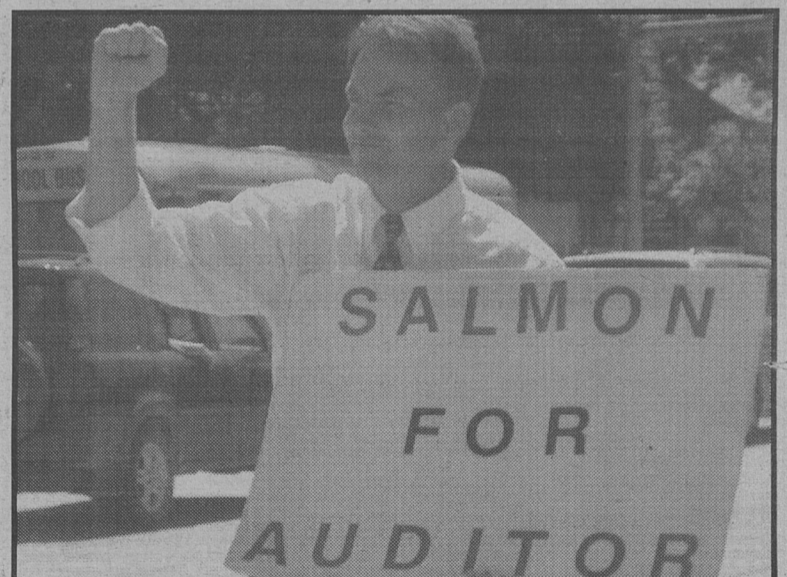
Through the generosity of our donors and other partners, since 1992 we've been able to convey, through grants and scholarships, more than \$500,000 to improve the quality of life for Vermont's LGBT citizens. And that's just the beginning...



s a m a r a  
foundation of vermont

Call us or visit our website for more information.

PO Box 1263  
90 Main Street  
Burlington VT 05402  
802 860 6236 802 861-2767 (T)  
info@samarafoundation.org  
www.samarafoundation.org



**FULL COMMITMENT  
TO ALL VERMONTERS.**

**The only CPA running  
to serve you.**

PAID FOR BY SALMON FOR AUDITOR  
P.O. Box 341, BELLOWS FALLS, VT 05101  
**salmonforauditor.com**