

# A celebration is born

by Leah Wittenberg

"Water won't run straight and neither will we."

As I recall it, I was eating dinner with Laurie Larsun and Lucy Gluck at their Monroe Street apartment one evening in April or May of 1983 when in the course of conversation it became strikingly obvious that Burlington ought to have its own Lesbian and Gay Pride Day -- that we never celebrated ourselves as queers publicly in Burlington, although we did march and demonstrate for every other radical and progressive cause. Right then and there we set a date for the First Vermont Lesbian and Gay Pride Day, assigned some immediate priorities, and finished dinner.

I love this amazing way that politics can work here in Vermont -- to move from an idea, a wish, a need, to an effective action; to start at the kitchen table, move out into the streets, and end up back at the kitchen table again (which is where I am right now).

## Battle against bigotry

COMMENTARY by Warren T.

In ancient times a stigma was a branded mark burnt or cut into the flesh of slaves and prisoners as a permanent identification mark. In more recent times it has been an attitude, belief, strategy or a promulgation used to detract from the character and reputation of any individual or group. It is a mark of infamy, disgrace, a blemish on one's character or a blot on one's good name. It is a way to gain some measure of social control over a person, people or a people.

In some situations as in the use of gossip as a political strategy, stigmatizing can be used to ruin another person's reputation to gain some apparent social advantage. Such stigmatization can be malicious and vicious to the individuals involved and may be Machivellian in nature. In these situations the individual may fight back and sometimes win over the stigmatist. This form of stigmatization is often seen in power struggles on the job and in the political arena. The Watergate scandal is an example of using stigma to gain an unfair advantage over political candidates. It was the strategy of Tricky Dick to use stigmas to steal power away from his opponent and to gain power over the people through deception. These situations are mild compared to the effect of stigmatizations promulgated on the basis of belief.

The word promulgate means to spread the word, to publish or make known officially as in a decree or church dogma. In this way stigmatists can provoke the passage of laws that favor their bias or bigotry and cause the members of the stigmatized group

Truly grassroots.

Now as we approach our fourth Pride Day (already a tradition), I remember what it was like to be planning a celebration and not know if anyone was coming. Many of us had marched in N.Y.C., Boston, and San Francisco, anonymous in crowds of tens of thousands. We had no idea how many would march in Burlington or what the public reaction would be, or what shock waves being so out, so visible, would have on our lives. This was our first coming out, and like most coming outs was filled with intense fears and excitement, and a lot of reactions both negative and positive.

Our first negative reaction was from the police department who said no to a street permit for the march. It was hard to envision celebrating with pride on the sidewalks, and as it turned out, the police had no right to refuse us a permit. With help from the city attorney we were offered a verbal

to line in fear and terror or with guilt. The Moral Majority and other religious conservatives want to deal with abortion in this way. It has been their way in the past.

The ultimate effect of such group stigmatization is the loss of franchise. People in this position lose any recourse in the courts of the land for any crimes committed against them. The Jews were a disenfranchised minority in Europe for centuries. It was open season on them. Anyone could rob, beat or murder a Jew with impunity. The same had been true for the Black citizens of this country for one hundred years since their enslavement ended. They are not yet fully franchised. Women have been disenfranchised for centuries and have been the slaves of men until they began to make changes in this century. Homosexuals, except when married or tightly closeted, have been a disenfranchised group for centuries, and when they were caught outside the closets were robbed, beaten or murdered with impunity and if they were suspected, they were subject to unfair discrimination. Today their franchise is only partially acknowledged as evinced by the way the courts act on gay rights cases.

It makes me feel angry and sad when I hear any person from any group, that is or has been disenfranchised, stigmatizing anyone. We shall be much more successful in the battle for civil rights, I believe, by taking a stand against all stigmatizations and hence against the minimizing of all people's rights and dignity. The battle against bigotry is not best served by bigots.

go-ahead but refused written permission -- an official police escort, but nothing in writing.

In 1983, the Burlington Board of Aldermen officially proclaimed June 25 Lesbian and Gay Pride Day. This was an incredible precedent for Burlington, and it felt like the times were really changing. Sadly, even with some wonderful support, the aldermen in the following years have not stuck with this brave example, preferring to hem and haw and proclaim their support for our civil rights but not to encourage our celebration of pride. Vermont lesbians and gay men should remember with the election for governor upcoming that Bernie Sanders did not in that first year or in any year following come out in support of our celebration.

What emerged in the organizing of this event were many firsts for the Burlington area. While women did all of the work in the early stages of planning, several men later joined the organizing group. This was the first time outside of the UVM Gay Student Union that I'd seen gay men involved politically. I believe this was the spark for what has become a visible and active involvement by men in local gay politics, e.g. Vermonters for Lesbian and Gay Rights, current Lesbian and Gay Pride organizing, and "Out in the Mountains."

In 1983 we asked for and received support in numbers from the straight community. This support felt critical to our lives and our safety. So it will again this year as AIDS and the ERA become banners the right wing waves as reasons to oppress us. We who would not choose any other way, who will not turn back, need to feel the active support of members of the progressive political community who pledge their resistance so fervently in solidarity with struggles many miles from their own homes.

The first Lesbian and Gay Pride Day was a celebration and it was this aspect of the day, complete with two colors of purple balloons, which set the tone for the following years. As queers we have plenty of confrontation in our lives, facing daily our internal and external closets, but celebration -- ah, that one day in 365 of being completely out -- that's pain, and pleasure, and pride and hope.

There is no turning back. Nostalgia has very little to offer queers. This year let's step out even of our own traditions, celebrate as never before, turn it around, turn it over, turn it inside out.



Best wishes go to Harry Russell and Brian Fisher who will be celebrating their fourth anniversary on June 21.

