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500 Rally in Burlington

The largest Vermont Lesbian and Gay Pride Celebration yet took place in Burlington on June 14. Approximately 500 people took part in the rally and parade.

Speakers throughout the event referred to the celebration's theme of "No Turning Back!". Keynote speaker Gil Gerald, Executive Director of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, told the crowd on the front lawn of the Unitarian Church that "For us, there can be no turning back. We have come too far and learned too much to ever turn back, even if we wanted to." Gerald called for a unified community response to the increasing right wing attacks, and pointed out the importance of building coalitions with, and learning from the experience of, other oppressed groups.

Governor Madeleine Kunin and Burlington Mayor Bernard Sanders, an independent candidate for Governor, both spoke to the rally. It was the first time either of them had attended a lesbian/gay pride celebration. (The Republican candidate for Governor, Peter Smith, declined an invitation.)

Kunin said that she supported "full civil rights for all citizens, including lesbians and gay men. It is within the Vermont tradition of tolerance and liberty that discrimination of any sort is wrong."

The Governor also noted that recent federal government estimates of a vast increase in the number of A.I.D.S. cases "points out what has been true all along, that A.I.D.S. is not simply a gay concern, but something which affects our entire society." She pledged "the determination of state government to do everything within its power to prevent the spread of A.I.D.S. in Vermont."

Sanders spoke of the need to connect the fight for lesbian and gay rights with other issues. "I take," he said "what I consider to be a conservative view of gay rights. It is a view which I believe should be shared by any thinking person, conservative, liberal or progressive. The view that it is wrong to discriminate



Photo by Glenn Russell

against anyone on the basis of something as irrelevant as sexual preference, instead of looking at what a person contributes to our community."

Speakers from numerous lesbian and gay community groups urged those in attendance to become involved in community activities. "Lesbian and gay concerns will not become a priority for other people until they become a priority for ourselves" said one speaker.

The parade through downtown Burlington which followed the rally was, as in past years, a colorful collection of banners, purple and pink balloons, and celebrants decked out in diverse outfits. The parade marched to the beat of Kwanza, a third world percussion group which also provided music during the rally.

The parade passed through the downtown area, which was crowded with those attending the Jazz Festival, the response from those on the sidewalk was friendlier than in past years. Many stopped and applauded the 500 marchers, and there was little

of the heckling which has marked past parades.

As the march returned to the Unitarian Church lawn, many people took part in the "open mike" session to talk about their feelings on marching. Many of those who spoke were straight friends and family members who had marched to show their support. Other speakers ranged from the humorous to political.

The rally ended with John Calvi leading the crowd in singing Holly Near's *Singing for our lives*.

Other events of the weekend, while drawing less attention than the rally, were quite successful. A Friday night concert featuring Susan Kenniston, John Calvi and Gilles Bonneau drew over 50 people to Christ Church. *Before Stonewall*, a documentary film of lesbian and gay history, drew large and enthusiastic crowds Saturday night.

The weekend events ended Sunday afternoon with an Interfaith Religious Service at the Friends Meeting House which was attended by over 50 people.