

# Behind the brown paper bag

b y                      D a v i d

Each year I have been asked if I planned to participate in the Gay Pride Celebration. Each year I have replied quickly, "No, I'm going out of town that day."

To my close friends I confided that my being publicly visible as a gay man was dangerous for my family. To myself alone I admitted I was afraid.

In the 1960s I learned that marching for a cause could be one of the greatest experiences of a lifetime. In those years we thought we were helping someone. We felt there was a chance to win. This seemed different. The numbers were smaller. Maybe it was too political. Or maybe it was not political enough, for the odds seemed greater.

I didn't want to take a chance. I had heard that people who marched in the Pride-day parade were "the exhibitionists" of the community. They were advertising -- if not recruiting. No. This was different. This was not my style.

Each year my reasons became more varied and less positive. I didn't have to admit I was afraid anymore. There was plenty of time.

As the AIDS problem became an epidemic and a crisis, I started to see time in a different perspective. What I thought was eternal now was sharply defined and, in the case of friends, no longer available.

This year I marched in the lesbian/gay parade and I marched with pride behind the banner "Vermont C.A.R.E.S." I marched for two friends who have died, and for a friend who could not march, but so desperately wanted to do what was right.

I chose to wear a paper bag over my head. I could have dressed as a clown, but this was not a comical event. I could have dressed as a woman, but my pride is that of a gay male and I will be known as such.

The paper bag was a symbol just as it is for the mothers who parade protesting for their sons imprisoned by government.

As I marched with that bag over my head, I was forced to walk blindly into people, stumble over curbs, suffer the fear of not knowing who was behind me, and experience the pain of not knowing who was a friend.

Toward the end of the parade, as we

reached the head of Church Street, those who had marched before turned and cheered us on.

It was then that I knew I would march again and again, each time wearing the bag for someone who could not march. If only I could write their names on the bag so they would know I care. If only we could tell the world how much we care.

## Maybe next year

Commentary

Say, friend - would you tell me when, uh, when, uh, well, you know, oh - Lesbian/Gay Pride Week-end - will take place? - Oh! That's happened already, and it was great! - Gosh, I'm sorry I missed it. - Well, you really did! But don't worry, there will be another celebration for our beautiful selves next year, for sure.

That's how I feel: where'd it go? Did I miss it? Was it only a lovely dream? It seemed--no, it was!--so real, so full, so perfect...so quickly over. This year's festivities warmed the heart, occasioned many a positive encounter and friendly exchange, reinforced relationships already formed; it also strengthened our public image as well-behaved (if occasionally noisy), proud, beautiful, mature, sophisticated, self-motivated, multitudinous...and possibly even ubiquitous, individuals.

There's something so comforting, so unifying to the soul, to be sharing good times with "birds of the same feather" and truly empathetic friends and - yes, even relatives!

Perhaps we should plan more activities for next year's Pride. Increasing numbers of events means, of course, increased participation in planning, organizing, and overseeing...more willing bodies (ah, what a lovely image that phrase conjures up!). Rather than a threatening thought, this is actually an enticement to contribute to the whole movement, an opportunity to risk oneself just a little further, to grow.

My friends all, consider this concept, then act on it: contact Gilles for further discussions. You'll thank your good self in the morning.

Gilles

## Letters to the Editor

### Homophobia in Brattleboro

To the editor:  
(Submitted also to the Brattleboro Reformer)

As a member of the gay community here in Brattleboro who for professional reasons is relocating, I take advantage of my imminent departure to come out of the closet publicly and to bring to the attention of the Brattleboro community at large the unique forms that homophobia (prejudice against homosexuals) can sometimes take here. Vermonters in general, and Brattleboro's citizens in particular, pride themselves on their traditional Yankee values; among these, the respect of privacy, the right to choose one's own lifestyle, ranks high. In the two years I've lived here, though I've met with considerable acceptance in some circles, I've found a surprising degree of hypocrisy, prejudice and violence.

Teaching in the public schools made me vulnerable to rumor, which became increasingly vicious as I became a familiar face in town through acting with the Vermont Theatre Company, waiting tables at the Common Ground and performing as a pianist. The more I was a part of the community, the less safe I became. Eventually, a rumor, undisclosed to me, reached the superintendent of schools' office. Without sufficient foreknowledge, I was required to defend myself against undefined charges of "inappropriate behavior" (I quote William Ellis). I have no doubt that the subsequent lack of support for my work was the result of prejudice at the administrative levels in the school hierarchy. Rumor has incredible power within the school system; those who are in a position to destroy it are too often concerned with their own status

and safety to uphold the values they espouse to the school children and the public. Homophobia, sexism and hypocrisy obtain at school, and children learn such covert attitudes from the source.

I've become accustomed to hearing shouts of "faggot," "queer," and the associated obscenities, from passing cars and pedestrians on Main Street. Gay men and women in Brattleboro get used to it, and it's an exceptional day that passes without such minor abuse, especially for those who live in town. More violent abuse, however, is not as rare as we would like to believe. I was assaulted last fall--right on Main Street, under a street lamp, at an early hour--and I've known of at least two far more serious incidents. The Reformer, though I credit the paper with balanced reporting on AIDS, seems to prefer reporting traffic accidents.

I urge Brattleboro's citizens to wake up - to question whether homophobia and its consequent violence and discrimination are a tolerable characteristic of this town, an acceptable tenet of "thinking New Englandly," as Emily Dickinson put it.

I also want to thank my co-workers at the Common Ground Restaurant and the Vermont Theatre Company, both gay and straight, who, in so many ways, have given me the courage to write this letter and to be who I am. I wish I could include the school district here; open-mindedness and justice should be primary concerns of the public.

Christopher Been  
Brattleboro

### Purpose

The purpose of *Out in the Mountains* is to serve as a voice for lesbians, gay men and our supporters in Vermont. We wish the newspaper to be a source of information, support and affirmation for lesbians and gay men. We also see it as a vehicle for celebration of the goodness and diversity of the lesbian and gay community.

### Editorial Policy

We will consider for publication any material which broadens our understanding of our lifestyles and of each other. Views and opinions appearing in the paper do not necessarily represent those of the staff.

This paper cannot, and will not endorse any candidate for public office. We will serve as a vehicle for informing our readers about the views of candidates and actions of public officials on issues of particular importance to lesbians and gay men.

We will not publish any material which is overtly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, ageist or homophobic.

All materials submitted must be signed and include an address and/or phone number so we can contact the author should we need to consider editorial revisions. However, within the pages of the newspaper, articles may appear anonymously, upon request, and strict confidentiality will be observed. No revisions or rejections of materials will occur without dialogue with the author.

We welcome and encourage all readers to submit materials for publication and to share your comments, criticisms and positive feelings with us. This paper is here for you.

The deadline for submitting material for each issue is the 15th of the month prior to publication.

Materials should be sent to:

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