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VERMONT'S NEWSPAPER for LESBIANS and GAY MEN

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Election Commentary

by Terje Anderson

For lesbians and gay in Vermont, the 1986 election was a major turning point. The narrow defeat of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment shattered, for once and for all, the mythology that Vermont is an open and tolerant place and the perception that reactionary right-wing forces in the state are weak.

We have lived through months of unbridled homophobia, as the anti-ERA campaign unleashed what the Vanguard Press called "the most negative, misleading and downright sleazy commercials, brochures and advertisements in the history of Vermont politics."

We've seen it all: brochures on the "ERA/Gay/AIDS connection", radio ads focusing on gay marriages, television commercials depicting leather-clad men on San Francisco's Polk Street, vicious personal attacks on community leaders, claims by one anti-ERA leader to possess a "homing device" to detect homosexuals, a daily assault of venom in the letters to the editor, and a host of other similarly vitriolic attacks.

Throughout it all, we stood virtually isolated and alone. The response of most of the pro-ERA organizations and leaders was simply to denounce the negative direction of the campaign and repeat the mantra that "prevailing legal opinion says that the ERA would not prevent discrimination against lesbians and gay men."

It was disappointing and painful to see that (with the exception of N.O.W.) most of our liberal/feminist friends sought only to distance themselves from us, instead of speaking out forcefully in defense of our basic humanity. Our allies deserted us.

In the end, that may have been the downfall of the ERA.

The anti-gay attacks on the ERA were developed and perfected long before this campaign, in ERA referenda in other states. The "ERA/GAY/AIDS" brochure and the television commercials, for example, were used, virtually word for word, in the 1984 Maine referendum. None of the ERA leadership should have been surprised by their appearance here.

Rather than prepare themselves to deal effectively with homophobia, the pro-ERA forces followed the same strategy which has failed in so many, many states before: burying their heads in the sand and refusing to believe voters would buy the bullshit being put out by the crazies. No one

VT L/G Coalition Issues Statement

Burlington: On Sunday, November 2, 1986, Vermont's statewide coalition of lesbians and gay men met for discussion and workshops. At the meeting the group decided to issue the following statement after election day. "We felt that our statement of concerns was really about the political process in Vermont rather than about any particular issue or candidate, and therefore chose to release it after the election was over" Howard Russell said Wednesday upon release of the statement. The statement, signed by 13 named individuals and supported anonymously by numerous others, says:

During the just-concluded political campaign Vermont has witnessed a terrifying display of public bigotry and hatred. The lesbian and gay citizens of Vermont have been the focus of public statements, campaign pamphlets and advertisements suggesting we have no rights to exist and certainly should have no rights to nondiscrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, insurance, privacy or family law. Yet we are at least ten percent of Vermont's population. We vote, work, own businesses, land and homes, and participate actively in our Vermont communities. Think of a job and some of us do it, just as straight Vermonters do. We are family members and we form families ourselves. In other words, we are as varied and as much a part of Vermont as are other Vermonters.

Sadly, when anti-E.R.A. spokespeople spewed their hatred about us during the campaign, pro-E.R.A. spokespeople, except for Eleanor Smeal, didn't protest. We feel certain that if the bigotry being expressed had been against a racial minority or a religious sect Vermont's pro-E.R.A. organizations would have been quick to condemn such sentiments. But in this E.R.A. campaign all we heard from the state's

seemed prepared for the final onslaught, and no effective strategy was in place to counter the ugliness.

As gay men and lesbians, we all too frequently aided and abetted that strategy. While many of us were involved in the campaign, doing the drudge work, by and large we bought into the larger strategy of "stay quiet, don't mess this up." Those who did speak out forcefully were snubbed and privately censured by the ERA leadership. For better or for worse, we accepted without

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pro-E.R.A. groups was "the E.R.A. has nothing to do with sexual orientation." Where were all the Vermonters dedicated to individual liberty and civil rights? Why such silence in the face of virulent gay-baiting?

During the 1960's, when the civil rights movement for racial equality emerged in the southern United States, there were many who understood that as long as anyone is not free, none are free. Martin Luther King, having studied Ghandi's wisdom, preached that so long as we are willing to tolerate the oppression of any group then we have sown the seeds of our own oppression. It is strange and sad to us that many Vermonters whom we know to have been supporters of and involved in many earlier struggles for civil rights seem to have forgotten so quickly how fragile freedom is, and by their silence have shown themselves willing to make us the expendable minority in the political campaign for the E.R.A.

For now, apparently there are some Vermonters who think there are good enough reasons to deprive us, the gay men and lesbians of Vermont, of many of the basic aspects of citizenship, and many other Vermonters who don't think our lack of rights is important enough to protest it. Perhaps if you knew who we are it would be harder to nod when someone says we are dangerous or deviant or shouldn't be allowed to create families or parent our own children. You don't know who we are because, for many of us, telling you would mean loss of a job, an apartment, a child or a friend. We know that every adult Vermonters is acquainted with someone who is gay. Most of these same Vermonters are not aware of knowing a gay person. If we are disappointed that more of you who could safely do so did not stand up and defend our rights during the E.R.A. campaign it is because many of us could not defend ourselves without risking devastating losses. The E.R.A. campaign has reminded us, however, that we may suffer loss of what few freedoms we have, and never gain full civil rights, if we remain silent. Therefore, the undersigned women and men of Vermont come forward to say "we are all gay." We hope you recognize some of us and hope that our coming out will give you pause the next time someone starts condemning us. We truly are your family, neighbors, friends, coworkers, and we are Vermonters. We care enough about everyone's freedom to demand freedom for ourselves.

WONDERFUL SOLSTICE HAPPY HANNUKAH