

S278 Public Hearing *from page 7*

long list of mothers supporting gay caregivers and teachers. Keith Goslant, liaison to the governor, questioned, "At what point does the need for silence become oppression?" Later, a native Vermonter said that the opposition was "twisting those terms so much you make me weep. The level of hatred in this room terrifies me."

The evening wore on, the television news people left, and still people testified. This year anonymous testimony was permitted. Many letters were read by brave proponents of the bill as the room of 700 people listened in nervous anticipation. Mothers who feared losing custody of their children, people fearing the loss of housing, and teachers fearing the loss of jobs all sent anonymous testimony.

At 10:30 the list of people wishing to testify was still long. The crowd began thinning out. One of the buses must have left as a block of opponents filed out.

A representative from Concerned Women of America and another from Eagle Forum talked of the breakup of the family unit and the destruction of society. The hatred and fear were clearly outlined, and the night wore on.

At 11:30, about 300 people remained, not all the people being called to testify stepped forward. Will Hunter called out 8 people listed as opponents before someone stepped forward. The proponents remained in the room and awaited their turn.

"Please, it's time we speak out against discrimination," pleaded Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur.

"Listen to the opposition", said Howdy Russell, "they will tell you more clearly than I can why we need to pass this bill in Vermont. You will hear about fear, hatred and bigotry."

John Bloomer, committee member from Rutland, left before 10:30. Phil Hoff stayed until about 11:30. At midnight, Mary Just Skinner announced that the hearing would end at 1am.

The men and women wearing the blue tags of support sat in silence as words of hate and fear were hurled at the microphone. At midnight, clearly the blue emblazoned people outnumbered the remaining opposition. Testimony continued. Many stayed until the bitter end, they said, in case the list of names of proponents wishing to testify ran out. It did not.

At 12:30 it was clear that all were exhausted. Chester Kitchum, committee member from Middlebury, moved next to Ms. Skinner. The three remaining committee members, Hunter, Kitchum, and Skinner, listened as the opposition's testimony now turned on them. In their opinions, the

hearing had been run unfairly, there had not been sufficient public announcement, and on and on. It seemed as if the strategy of opposition had changed from attacking gays to attacking a group of legislators that could even consider such a bill.

At 1:00 it seemed that the room breathed a collective sigh of relief. Another public verbal bashing of gays was over. There were no clear winners, only a lot of very battered people.

The Judiciary Committee will vote on whether or not to recommend this bill to the Senate by February 26. Then the Senate will vote on the bill and, if the vote is favorable the bill moves on to the House and another battle begins.

Thank you to all who helped to create a good turnout of support for S278. Now it is essential that we follow this effort with thank you's to the senators who vote for the bill and questions for those who vote against it. It is essential that we continue to lobby, this time with our house reps.

Next month we will print photos and excerpts from the hearing. Also, an article describing a model evening of lobbying where 8 people, sat with Sen. Dennis Delaney and discussed the need for S278 for two hours in an informal setting.

Coming Out *from page 7*

of the AIDS closet, telling people one-on-one and in groups. A major breakthrough was being interviewed by the Rutland Herald/Times Argus.

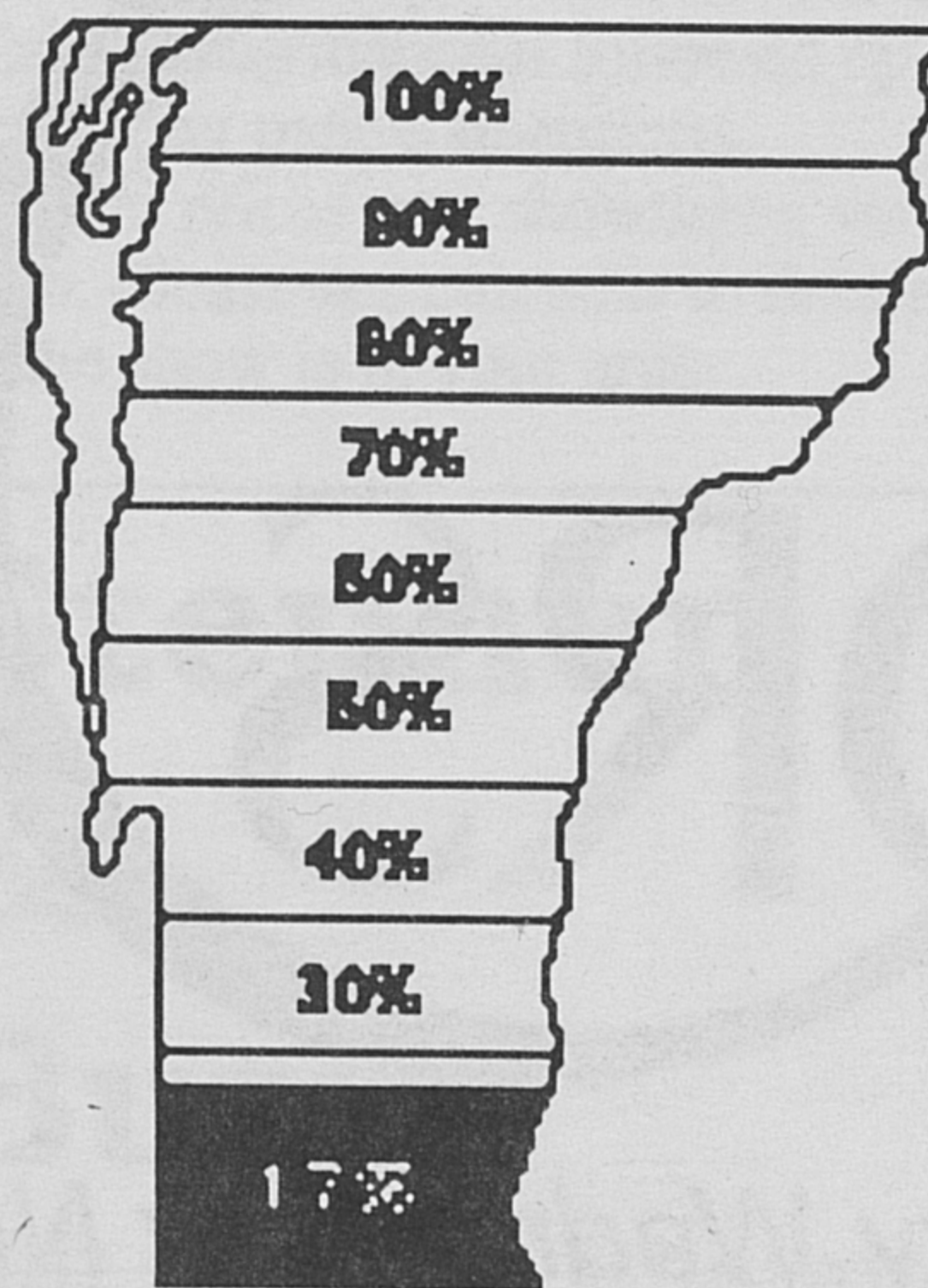
In mid-February, I made my first public appearance as a PWA in Barre. Speaking in public is frightening for me, given the speech problems I have. The crowd received me warmly; it helps give me the confidence to do it again.

Being active in Vermont CARES, coming out publicly, has helped me with the isolation of having AIDS in Vermont. I only know three other people with AIDS in Vermont. On a recent visit to a friend in New York, I saw how isolated PWA's are in Vermont. At PWA lounges, lunches and drop-in events, dozens of people with AIDS sit around and exchange notes on treatments, t-cell counts, and life after diagnosis. There is something very comforting about learning from and sharing with others who have "been there." While I'm very glad that there are few people with AIDS in Vermont, I do find myself wishing there were more people to talk with here.

I go through cycles of sadness, of anger, of self-pity, of frustration and hopelessness; but I also enjoy periods of happiness, of appreciation for my day to day joys, of hope and determination, and of playfulness. I laugh about it all much more than you might imagine (please, any good dementia jokes?).

I refuse to be seen or treated solely as a person with AIDS. I don't want people's pity or condescension, but I do demand the right to be treated with respect and consideration. Despite the diagnosis and the effect it has had on my life, I remain, in essence, the same person I have always been with the same strengths and weaknesses, and growing everyday from the experience.

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