

Commentary

The Time to be Equal is NOW!

by Holly Perdue
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for Lesbians and Gay Men

So, here we are again preparing ourselves to introduce the Civil Rights Bill for Lesbians and Gay Men into the Vermont Legislature. Once again the words "sexual orientation" will be added on to existing statutes to ensure that we are covered. "Sexual orientation," as previously defined, is "female or male homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality by orientation or practice, by and between consenting adults." This means that virtually everyone is covered in this bill and, horror upon horrors, yes! Heterosexuals - Aaaagh! So not only if a lesbian or gay man were fired or refused housing or asked to leave a restaurant or hotel or denied custody or denied credit or an insurance policy or denied a restraining order from domestic abuse or an education because of his or her sexual orientation, but if a heterosexual were also discriminated against because he or she was a heterosexual, then he or she would also be covered by the bill.

The best estimates are that over 50,000 Vermonters are lesbian or gay. What a political force! Many of us live in isolation, perhaps with only our partner(s) as support, perhaps with not even that. Many of us live with our own private social network such as the softball or volleyball circles. Within these networks, we feel "safe." Outside of these networks, we feel very vulnerable. Most of us also participate in activities that are primarily heterosexual in nature. From these groups we also receive some sort of

support, or else we would not be involved in them. We as individuals are allowed to have opinions that do not necessarily identify us as being part of that class of people. For example, many white people support civil rights for people of color. So, why are we afraid to speak up for ourselves? It is much easier for a blatant heterosexual to support civil rights for lesbians and gay men than it is for a lesbian or gay man. There is a saying circulating in our community that the biggest homophobes are those lesbians and gay men who are furthest in the closet.

During the last session when the civil rights bill was active, our respite worker's husband said to me that he really did not care whether the civil rights bill passed or not because it would not affect him personally. There were no quotas to be met, so, as long as he did well at his job, he was safe.

The legislators and the media hear only from the opposition that is passionate about the subject; they do not hear from the average person. What if we could tap into those apathetic Vermonters to support our cause? What if we said to them "It does affect you. If you feel you have nothing to lose, why not help me have everything to gain?" How hard is it to admit being lesbian or gay?

Is it necessary to come out to speak to people about the bill? No; it is not necessary. If you are speaking to your legislator, point out that it is a civil right bill for all people. Legislators do not keep a voter registration list next to their phones to check off who calls for which bills. If you are concerned about being identified with

the civil rights bill, then call them about other bills of interest too. Contact them over time on different issues. It is important to be supportive of the legislators as well as pressuring them to support us.

Here is a checklist of items to complete to support this bill in the coming session:

1. Call each candidate and ask him or her point blank if he or she supports the civil rights bill for lesbians and gay men.
2. Support those candidates who do support full civil rights. Send money, offer to lick envelopes. Tell your friends to vote for this person.
3. Actively work against people who do not support civil rights for lesbians and gay men.
4. Support the Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men. We are actively working right now to draft the current civil rights bill and to plan strategy for the upcoming legislative session.
5. Educate yourself and your friends. This bill affects you regardless of how far you are in or out of the closet. Our biggest enemies may be our ignorant selves.
6. Think of civic groups, churches, or businesses that might endorse this civil rights legislation. Ask them to write a letter of support and mail it to VCLGM, PO Box 1125, Montpelier VT 05602.
7. If you are unsure of what to do to help support the bill or would like to learn more about the legislature, ask to have someone come and speak to a group of your friends at your home. Keith Goslant or I are available to do this.
8. Form a phone tree to disseminate information rapidly. Sometimes overnight is all we have. Designate one person to be the contact and give that name to me. Whenever we have important information, we will utilize this network.
9. Help strategize for the next legislative session. We have steering committee meetings in Montpelier for anyone who would like to attend. Call Keith or I (see Resource Page) and we will let you know when they are scheduled.

It is very important to remember that we are not one-issue individuals. We do not exist in a world which only includes lesbians and gay men. We support other people's issues. It is time now to support our own and to have everyone else support full civil rights for everyone.

SAFE, SEXY, AND SANE!

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in your home?**

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or
1-800-649-2437 for Washington, Addison, and
Rutland counties.

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