

## Out in the Mountains

established in 1986

In honor of National Coming Out Day, we at *Out in the Mountains* decided that we'd take our next step in coming out and tell you exactly who we are:

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## To Submit Articles and Letters

We encourage and implore our readers to do what they can to make OITM a paper both for and by gay, lesbian, and bisexual Vermonters. Please assist us by typing your articles and letters double-spaced and including your name and phone number in case we have any questions. Your submission should be received by OITM no later than the 7th of the previous month. Thank you for helping out!

## Editorial

### Coming In

by Hugh Coyle

With National Coming Out Day happening this month, those gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who are still in the closet will find themselves once again urged to come out, come out, wherever they are and admit to their true sexual orientation. But the challenge of National Coming Out Day doesn't rest with closeted individuals alone; it makes its demands on all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

Those of us who are "out," however we may define that term, can and should remember what it was like to finally confess to the undeniable existence of a same-sex attraction within ourselves. As a matter of fact, we should take the time to write it all down (as we asked some OITM devotees to do) just so that we never forget what it was like to go through that trauma, and so we can further celebrate the richness of the rewards. In doing so, we can also begin to share with others what that experience is like. After all, no one wants to step out of the closet without knowing something about what one is stepping into.

This is where the challenge of Coming Out Day is greatest for the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities: in making those communities open and welcoming enough for people to come in. Without providing a receptive environment for young, confused, questioning, or just plain scared gays and lesbians, the trauma of coming out will not be lessened, and the likelihood of its occurrence will diminish. We must all work against that scenario and do what we can to help those who are still closeted to take those first few necessary steps.

A great part of this receptiveness involves patience and understanding along with encouragement and support. This is where the whole notion of outing went astray - by fostering hostilities towards those still in the closet, by employing forceful methods to push people "out," by setting the agenda for individuals on what should and must be a personal process. Nothing is gained by dragging someone to the top of a mountain; only when that person has made the journey himself or herself will the view achieved come to have full meaning.

This is not to say that the journey needs to be made alone, but there must be provisions made for solitude and reflection along the way. A person coming out of the closet is learning to define himself or herself in new ways and is therefore vulnerable to outside influences. Many of these come

from the straight world in the form of rejection: "It's just a phase," "You're not that way," "A good shrink can help you be normal again." Sadly, a number of these pressuring influences also come from our own community as we too set definitions, expectations, and limitations on the uses of the words "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual."

A person coming out of the closet is coming into our community with all sorts of new possibilities and energies. He or she should be treated with tenderness and respect, with open minds as well as open arms. We need to affirm ourselves as honest, caring individuals capable of healing the wounds often incurred as a person escapes from his or her prison of denial. We need to give that person time to rest, to recover from the huge task he or she has just accomplished, to regain the strength it took to bring down the walls of that prison.

The best advice I ever received while I was coming out was from a straight friend of mine who told me to take it easy and to expect some wrong turns here and there. "Remember that this is a process," he told me, "and that you can't expect it to be over and done with overnight." Such advice gave me room to breathe as I left the closet. I felt I wasn't being rushed along into a dense crowd of anxious people eager to enlist me into the forces fighting for "the cause;" it was more like walking casually into a room of friends who were ready to help when called upon, yet who were equally ready to leave the room for a while as I explored my new surroundings for myself before settling in.

I'm still exploring the room I came into, and it's a big and wonderful room. I've bumped into the walls a few times, tripped over a few pieces of furniture that I hadn't expected to find there, stepped on the toes of other people as they too looked around, and made some of my own strategies for re-designing and redecorating the place. I'm thankful to the people who have allowed me such freedom, because they've allowed me to be more myself than I was ever allowed in the heterosexual world.

For me, this has been the true measure of my "coming out" process, which continues along with all of its successes and setbacks. The reward of it has been the acceptance I have found, both in my new friends and in myself. It is this sense of acceptance, of welcoming in, which I urge all of us, straight and gay alike, to continue to strive toward on Coming Out Day this year.