

# Community Based Police Interview

Walter I. Zeichner

Present for the interview were Tim Ahonen, Greg Knight, Sonny Provetto, and Dave Scibek. conducted 3/4/93

**Tim:** I think it's good that we're talking, we need communication. I always thought of gay people as the others. That's the way I grew up. I grew up in Massachusetts. When I was in college I had a professor that I respected a lot. I went all the way through college and at the very end I found out this person was gay, and it really opened my eyes to the fact that it isn't this caricature that I'd seen all my life either on TV or in movies, on the news. That made a big difference. Sonny and I were both there the night of the really terrible beating at Pearl's. That was a big shock. As much as people talk about prejudice, and there was blood everywhere, nobody stopped for a minute and said "I wonder if I'm gonna get AIDS from this." It was more like, "this is terrible." I was just stunned. You don't think about that [AIDS] in an emergency, and I think that shows that the prejudice is learned, it's not instinctive or anything else.

**OITM:** What do you think the problems have been in the past, both from the point of view of the department and in terms of your perceptions of the gay community?

**Greg:** As I said when we first met we're both dealing with a stigma. The gay community has things assigned to it, titles, like "you're queer, you're a fag" and the stereotypical stuff that goes with it. Police officers get the same thing. I get called a Nazi or a fascist. When I get out of the car automatically it's adversarial. Nobody wants to talk to me because I represent authority. I'm there because there's a problem. What I think we need to do is to realize that that exists for both groups, for the law enforcement and for the Gay and Lesbian Community. I think that once

both communities realize that's there and they're aware when they're feeling it and you get to know people in both communities, there's no need to feel that way, and there's no need for that stigma to exist at all.

**OITM:** What in terms of training for police do you think is needed?

**Tim:** Sometimes it's just experience. Some of it comes with age, it brings in different points of view. In my home town you never saw black people, you never saw Asian people, you never say anything other than the WASP issue. We used to go on field trips to Boston and we'd see black kids and it was very frightening. The only context where we saw black people was on television in a riot or a crime or something, so of course we all thought they were going to riot and get us. It's ridiculous. Contact itself is going to break that down. That's the best way to do it, if you can listen to what our concerns and fears are and tell us about yours.

**Dave:** A lot of it is the officers attitude as well. I'd like to think that most of us have an open attitude and a professional detachment when we investigate crimes. Vermont is fortunate enough that we have very specific laws about gay bashing and hate crimes and things like that. We're aware of those. We've already been trained in those, so that for training we're looking at some kind of personal development, so the officers attitude would be changed in some way if it needed to be to accommodate the specific needs of the gay and lesbian Community. More sensitivity, less of a professionally detached demeanor, something like that.

**OITM:** One thing that I think is true is that we often assume people are going to be prejudiced against us because that's so

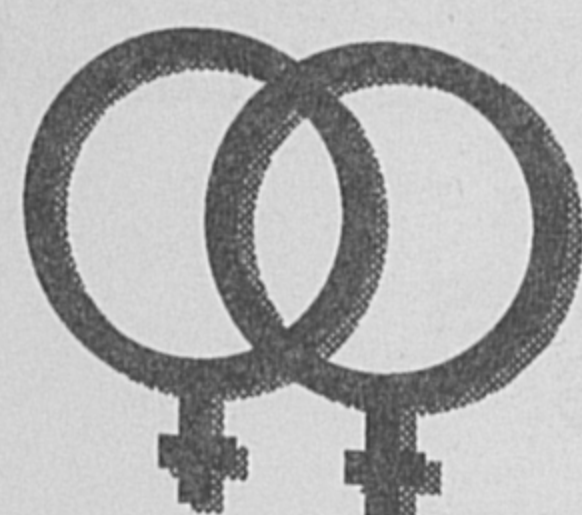
much of our experience, so when one of you shows up we're going to assume that you're going to have certain prejudices against us. It may or may not be true. In some cases it probably is and some cases it isn't. It seems like the communication is important.

**Dave:** I agree. When I step out of my car or jump off my bike or walk up to someone...I wait, I appear as normal as I can in my little Nazi uniform, and I see how people are going to react to me. Sometimes it's perfectly normal. People are comfortable with the idea of an officer being present, and other times it's, as Greg said, adversarial. People are frightened. I walked into the Sara Holbrook Center one evening, because I know the staff there and I pay frequent visits. I see if the kids are around and I interact with them. This woman was teaching an Adult Education class upstairs. I walked up and she was visibly frightened. She said "That uniform scares me." I just thanked her for answering my question, because there was no one else there, but she was shaken by my mere presence, which made me uncomfortable because I didn't want her to feel that way.

**Sonny:** I think initially our first response should be some education dealing with terminology. First impression is everything. We spoke about this at our last meeting. Educate us on how to communicate, how to address the person properly. People of color for instance, do you call them black, do you call them people of color, what do you call people from the gay and lesbian Community? I don't know. I think if we set those parameters that this is acceptable language to use with people to break down the barrier, you send a message that "this person knows who I am" so we can get communication going. The second thing I

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