

Out in the Mountains

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Protest in Barre

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Some people were content to go with the flow, stand in the lines, and be led along through the Barre Auditorium, where the Philip Morris Company began its national tour of the Bill of Rights. Others assembled outside to exercise those rights in a manner perhaps more befitting the documents than the multi-media blitz offered up by the sponsor of the tour.

Members of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) and the Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men were joined by representatives from the Vermont Rainbow Coalition, the Vermont AIDS Council, the Vermont Consumers' Campaign for Health, the Vermont chapter of the American Heart Association, and the Vermont chapter of the National Lawyers' Guild in condemning the Philip Morris Company for its hypocritical presentation of the historical document.

The protest at the Bill of Rights exhibit continues a long-standing expression of disapproval being voiced by the gay and lesbian community. Most notable in the ongoing denunciation of Philip Morris are the boycotts against Marlboro cigarettes and Miller beer, both of which are owned and marketed by the company.

Philip Morris is one of the largest corporate sponsors of Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), whose actions in the Senate have run contrary to the messages contained in the Bill of Rights. Helms has sought to strengthen government censorship in the arts, with gay and lesbian works as his prime target. He has also voiced strong opinions against funding for AIDS, the national Hate Crimes act, and the Americans with Disabilities act.

Representatives of Philip Morris claim that the company does not wholeheartedly

embrace all of the Senator's opinions, and have pointed out that Philip Morris has also been a significant contributor to AIDS-related research (which, given that ambiguous designation, could mean a great number of things not directly involving the virus itself).

Regardless of its own stated position, the company has donated \$175,000 to memorialize Jesse Helms with the construction of the Jesse Helms Citizenship Center.

In a presentation prior to the opening of the Bill of Rights exhibit, Keith Goslant, the Co-liaison to the Governor for the Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men, referred to the tour as a "smokescreen" aimed at manufacturing a positive image for the Philip Morris company. Other groups drew attention to the company's heavy lobbying for the tobacco industry, contrasting that with the nationwide figures for the number of deaths caused each year by smoking.

Though none of the groups was opposed to the Bill of Rights tour itself, public perception fixated on that aspect of the protests, drawing heavy criticism from spectators at the opening day celebration on Wednesday, October 10. Hecklers shouted homophobic insults at the members of ACT UP protesting outside the Barre Auditorium, while other bystanders voiced their beliefs that a protest was unwarranted.

Still, the original incentive behind the protest was to attract attention and stimulate discussion, as well as to educate people about the restrictions of rights being endorsed by Philip Morris's support of Jesse Helms.

As the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, the opening of the Bill of Rights tour presented a symbolic opportunity to exercise those very freedoms, and in so doing remind the public that corporations cannot and should not be allowed to hide behind media campaigns such as the Bill of Rights tour.

Celebrating the Rhythm



Edwina Lee Tyler and A Piece of the World (Pat Hall-Smith, Roberta J. Stokes, and Linda Thomas Jones) energized the crowd at the Coming Out Day Celebration concert in Montpelier on October 13, 1990. (Photo courtesy of Pone Mandel)