

Testing the Waters

Gary Sexton

Recently, the Northeast Vermonters for Gay and Lesbian Rights, (NEVGALR), held a small petition drive for the citizens of St. Johnsbury. The purpose of this drive was to present evidence to our Congressional leaders in Washington D.C., as well as President Bill Clinton, that there is support in lifting the ban on gays and lesbians in the military. When NEVGALR set out to conduct this drive we felt that the success would be minimal in our response to signatures. In spite of suspecting the response may not be quite what was hoped for, we felt that an effort was necessary, if for no other purpose then to let St. Johnsbury know that gays and lesbians were here.

Traditionally St. Johnsbury, by standards of most American cities, is a small rural community, whose composition is basically Republican. St. Johnsbury is part of the notoriously famous Northeast Kingdom's conservatism. This region of Vermont is one of the most economically hard hit communities of New England and people here hold on to traditional values with a furious conservatism.

We placed the petition in two area businesses, a local health food store and a bookshop, believing that these businesses would attract the greatest number of progressive thinkers. Also we felt that most other business's here would refuse to accept this petition. The petition read as follows:

We, the undersigned residents of Vermont, support President Clinton's lifting of the ban on gays and Lesbians serving in our military. We acknowledge that Gays and Lesbians have been making a valuable contribution to the United States military since its inception. We request that the Congress and the Joint

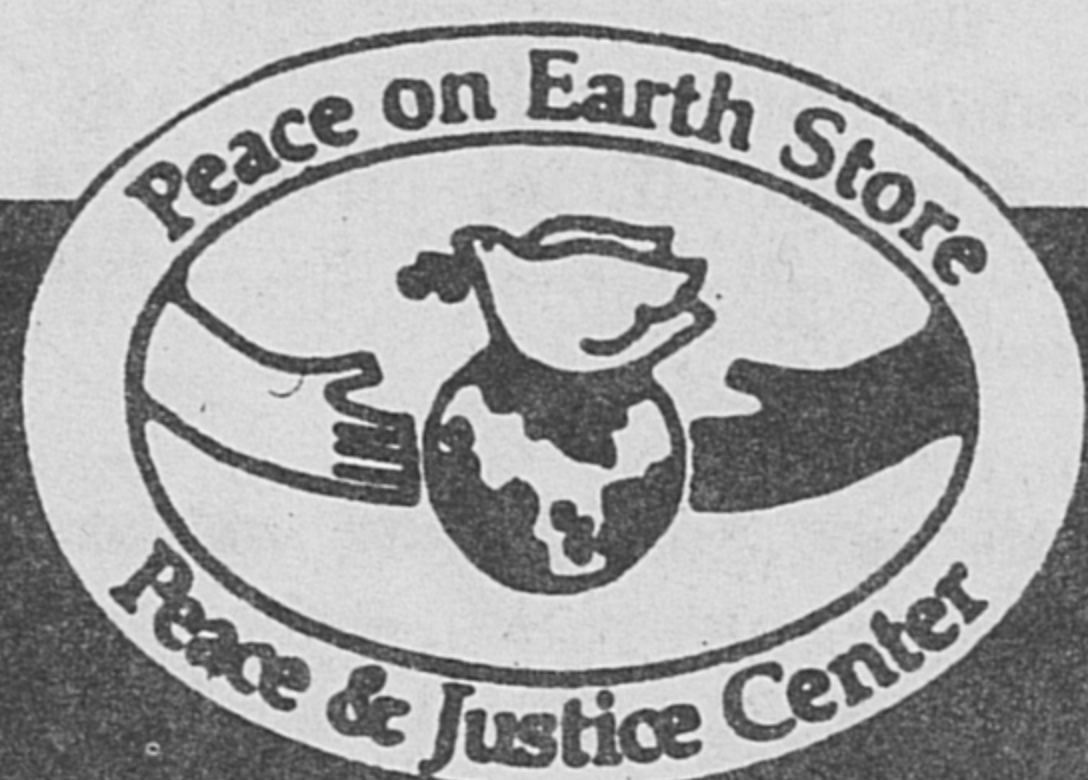
Chiefs of Staff work with the President to recognize these honorable and dedicated citizens.

After leaving these petitions in the assigned areas for about a month we went back to collect the signed copies. To our surprise, we found that literally hundreds of individuals had signed. Often when the page was filled people were using the blank backs of the petition to sign. The bookshop informed us that in the past most petition efforts that had been conducted at their shop had met with little success, not this one. The response was far greater than anyone at NEVGALR ever anticipated, and it surpassed all expectations.

The petitions have been photocopied and have been sent to both Senators Leahy and Jeffords offices, as well as the original petition going to President Clinton. The response of this drive has served as an educational tool to us at NEVGALR. It shows that despite the conservatism that we had come to know surrounds the gays and lesbians in St. Johnsbury, there is a large percentage of the population that is willing to stand up and be counted as supporters of Gay and Lesbian rights. In light of this success one can only wonder if the gay and lesbian community might, on occasion, be guilty of the same negative stereotyping of which we accuse others? ▼

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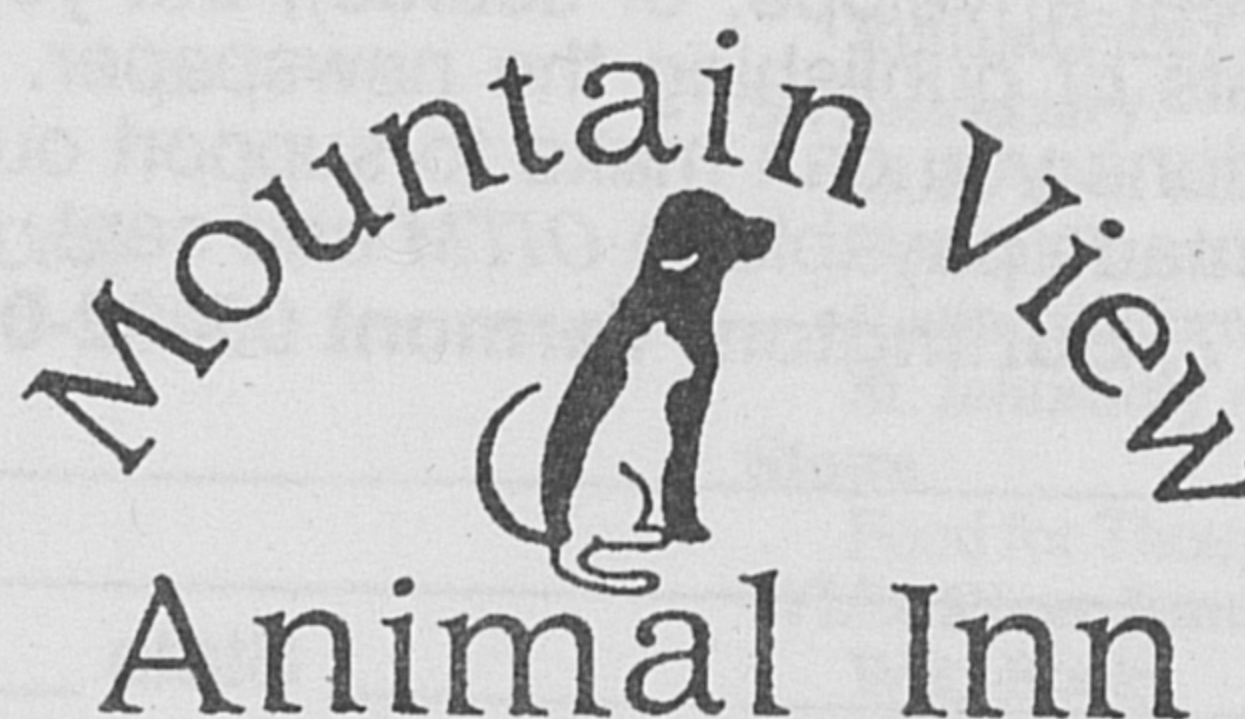
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