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Out in the Mountains

VERMONT'S NEWSPAPER FOR LESBIANS, GAY MEN, AND BISEXUALS

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Creating Crowds: Hundreds Turn Out for Conference

Carrie Coy

Over 300 people turned out for a day-long conference sponsored by the Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men in Randolph, December 4th.

"It's wonderful," said organizer Terje Anderson, "bringing this many people together and re-energizing them." The conference *Creating Change/Creating Community* was a first-of-its-kind event for the newly revitalized coalition. Participants attended dozens of hour-long workshops and elected a new slate of officers. Workshop topics ranged from *Fighting the Far Right Nationally to Single in the Sticks: A Group Discussion*.

Vermont's neighbors are under attack was the message of one well-attended session. Lambda Legal Defense Fund attorney Suzanne Goldberg chronicled recent losses to the far right in New Hampshire, Maine and New York. Participants questioned how to cement legislative victories in Vermont. "It's so important not to let this fade away," said participant Eileen Blackwood, of the network built during the legislative battles of the past few years.

A heralded debate on the merits of lesbian/gay marriage collapsed in a spirit of unanimity. Debaters Paula Etlebrick of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and David Chambers, a University of Michigan law professor, shared an opinion that the obtaining the right to marry should be



(From left to right) Terje Anderson, Mary Hurlie, Susan Murray - Coordinators

low on the community's priority list. "We should ask," said Etlebrick, "what mark is our movement going to make?" She argued that the winning right to marry our partners would be a "narrow victory." "It fails," she said, "to recognize the need for a broader definition of family." Certain families, Etlebrick said, would remain unrecognized by the system. "What about older people living together platonically or disabled people with a financial disincentive to marry?" Etlebrick asked. These "invisible" families, she said, remain outside the system, implicitly inferior and denied the perks accorded legally recognized families.

Seventeen people representing all regions of the state were elected to the first-ever full Board of Directors. Coalition liaisons to the Governor Holly Perdue and

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State Worker's Union Battles for Benefits

Carrie Coy

Health care benefits for partners of gay and lesbian state workers may soon be a reality if their union has its way. The state says it has no legal obligation to provide benefits, but the 4600-member Vermont State Employee's Association says otherwise. Unless the state decides to settle first, says union representative Steve Jansen, the issue will likely be decided in contract negotiations, or by the Vermont Labor Relations Board, the same entity that ruled in favor of gay and lesbian University of Vermont employees last summer.

Either way, an outcome should be known by next June. The union is representing three state workers whose same-sex partners were denied coverage. A grievance alleging an "unfair labor practice" is expected to be filed on their behalf in December with the VLRB. An employee who was denied coverage for his female partner, was prevented from joining the grievance because the suit is being filed exclusively on behalf of same-sex partners. A quick resolution from VLRB is unlikely since a hearing will not likely be held before February, and a decision may not come for several months after that. Board decisions may be appealed to the Vermont Supreme Court.

The Personnel Department initially denied the applicants because they did not apply during the open enrollment period. When workers reapplied during the open period, they were again denied. One was told it was "fruitless" because the prospective dependent was not a "spouse or child." A hearing in November before the Personnel Department, required by the resolution process, was also denied.

Phot by Cheri Goldstein

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