

Outright Changes Guard and Carries On

Dorothea V. Brauer

It was a warm Sunday evening in July of 1991. The sun was still afternoon bright on the dashboard as I drove into Burlington with Howdy Russell to play volleyball. When he asked me if I would consider applying for the position that was opening at Outright Vermont, I was excited and also hesitant. I did apply; I was offered the position, and thus began fourteen of the most challenging, enlightening, difficult, and rewarding months of my life.

During that time I had the opportunity to work with Howdy Russell in his last months as Board Chair and Eric Nichols in his first. As of this March, Eric stepped down after two years as Board Chair. The current Board of Directors has asked me to write something about my experience of these two men to help us remember the leadership that has been so important to sustaining the vision and life energy of Outright Vermont during its most recent chapter of development.

Before I began at Outright, I knew Howdy as something of a local hero. He

had helped form the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Men, *Out In The Mountains*, and Vermont Gay Volleyball. He had put his face in front of newspaper and television cameras lobbying in the State House for passage of civil rights legislation. Most recently he had helped form Outright, an organization committed to improving the condition of glb youth, and run for the Vermont Senate. I saw him as a man of great courage, deep resolve and incisive vision. If Howdy believed in something, he worked at it with everything that he had.

At Outright I realized that Howdy's leadership came from his ability to believe deeply enough to carry people around him through the murky uncertainties of their own doubts. Over the months I became aware of how much Howdy too struggled with doubts and fears and I came to appreciate more deeply another dimension of leadership: the ability to maintain your resolve in spite of being frightened to your core. I spoke with Howdy recently about his recollections about Outright.

db: Why did you get involved in forming Outright?

HR: I went to a training given by the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Boston in 1988. There was a panel of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people there and they were very challenging. They kept responding to gay adults' statements about why we felt paralyzed to help, by saying, "Well you have to do it anyway. If you're not going to do it, who is?" They were not at all disuaded by our best rational arguments for why we couldn't do it. I realized how much the experience they were describing resonated with my own experience growing up here in Vermont.

db: Can you describe how Outright got started?

HR: A group of people began meeting in November of 1988 and began brainstorming and fantasizing about what could be done. In the summer of 1989, 12 of us attended an all day retreat and made a financial commitment to raise the money personally to secure the office over VT CARES for the first year. Then we started grant writing and began securing the funds to hire the first staff person.

db: What was the biggest struggle for you in your work with Outright?

HR: That's a hard one. In some ways it seemed that the more we did, the more we uncovered and it felt overwhelming. It was hard seeing the need and knowing how to respond, but simply not being able to do it all. What became necessary for all of us working there, staff and volunteers, was we had to learn to set limits and realize that we were doing the best we could. You can burn individuals and organizations out fast.

db: What was most exciting for you?

HR: This is also a hard question because there is a lot to choose from. One of the most exciting things was moving to our current office. We were no longer just a subletter, we had become an organization in our own right. Not just the physical move, but what it symbolized. The other exciting thing for me is anytime I help facilitate a support group for young people there. That's always a highlight for me and reminds me of what it's all about. Its just been exciting watching Outright grow, seeing different people get involved over the years in positions of leadership, and how each person has brought something different; it has always turned out to be just what the organization needed at the time.

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May 21

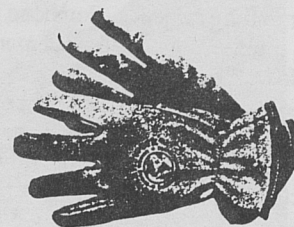
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