

## Vermont Cares

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time, this incident has not been deemed a hate crime, and police have no suspects. Damage from the fire was estimated at over \$100,000. Vermont CARES, which stands for Vermont Committee for AIDS Resources, Education, and Service, supports over 100 clients in Addison, Chittenden, Rutland, and Washington counties.

Speaking at the interfaith service, Vermont CARES Executive Director Kate Hill spoke of how the arson attack has altered her perspective on her work. "The events of the past week have been overwhelming to us all...I can only speak from my own personal reaction, but I have known for some time that there is anger, there is lack of understanding, there is the potential for violence always out there. It's never here. Well, this week it was here. I never actually saw violence until I stood in the middle of our offices this week and I ran my hand along the charred woodwork...It has brought me personally to a new level of understanding about what's really going on." She also said, however, that she was encouraged by the wide-ranging support that her organization has received since news of the fire spread. She called this positive response "absolutely unbelievable", and told the group of approximately 400 people at the service, "You're being here tonight, however, makes me know that what we are doing is right, and it gives me hope and encouragement to keep on doing what we are doing."

David Curtis, Chair of the Board of Vermont CARES, while speaking at the service, also made reference to the support received over the week following the fire. "We quickly learned that we are not alone, and that the ignorance of the few is not

shared by the many....It tells us that you, and the community as a whole, do support the work that we do notwithstanding that noise out there from a vocal few."

As a show of support, Vermont legislators pledged \$25,000 in state funds to aid in the reorganization of Vermont CARES as long as the organization can raise \$25,000 on their own in private donations. As part of that effort, volunteers sat by donation tables in front of the former home of Vermont CARES as well as on the Church Street Marketplace. An offering plate was also passed around during the interfaith service.

Another show of support came from Burlington's spiritual community the day after the arson attack when members of the clergy gathered outside the burnt building to condemn the act of violence. Spiritual leaders who spoke included Rabbi Joshua Chasen of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue and Rev. Becky Strader of Christ Church, Presbyterian. The statement that surprised most, however, was from Rev. Kenneth Angell, bishop of the statewide Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, who has been vocal in the past in his opposition to the mission of Vermont CARES. "We might not always agree," Angell stated, "But I tell you this, that I am unalterably opposed to acts of violence. I am shocked and dismayed someone would resort to violence as a solution." Perhaps in response to Angell's presence, Rev. John Nutting of the United Church of Christ said, "We as church people need to be very careful who we call sinners in public discourse...The danger is, a signal is sent that it is OK to attack or do violence to these people because there's something wrong with them."

During one of the more powerful moments of the worship service, Rabbi Chasen addressed issues of hatred and bigotry when he said, "Until we recognize in the most fundamental way the essential quality of our being, until we come to know in the deepest

places of our souls that our physical and cultural differences are wonderful, then we will inhibit our personal fulfillment and condemn ourselves to watching the breakdown of our society." When speaking specifically about the fire, Chasen continued, "Whatever the personal motivation behind the arson, the building was torched because we have not challenged enough the habits of blaming others for our own insecurities...We have blamed people with HIV/AIDS for our own fears of dying. We have bequeathed these weaknesses to our children and grandchildren with more intention than we devote to teaching the better purposes of our religious traditions." He then received laughter and applause when he said, "Don't you love it when we're asked by people who don't know the difference between Genesis and Deuteronomy, 'What about that verse in Leviticus?'" He also sent a strong message to the religious community and his colleagues in spiritual leadership when he proclaimed, "Every human being is created in the image of God. Therefore, we are to respect each other, accept and honor each other's being in each other's terms...May we, in this community's religious congregations, not shy away from the courage of our convictions. We have a ways to go."

In a separate interview, Terje Anderson, co-founder of Vermont CARES, talked about a community meeting that the Board asked him to help organize. "What we're hoping to have come out of the meeting are a couple of different things," Anderson said, "One is certainly to give people a chance to talk about what happened....I think a lot of people have a lot to say and they need to give voice to that. That's the first step before moving on with anything else, being able to talk about the anger or the fear....The second part...is to get real, solid, substantial information out to people about what did and didn't happen." Anderson stated that some misinformation has been circulating concerning issues such as client files and their subsequent

### Vermont CARES Needs Your Help

Donations of money, furniture and equipment are still needed. Please contact Sylvia Racca, Director of Administration to discuss our most pressing needs.

Call (802) 863-2437 or 1-800-649-2437.

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