

Picketing Homophobia on Main Street

Sharon Levin

Picketing of Strictly Vermont, which is distributing what has been called hate literature in its store in Burlington, may change how the Community, the fundamentalist Christian sect that publishes the booklets and owns the store, writes in the future.

"I was really outraged by the kinds of quotes," said Tom Smith, who organized the picket, "particularly the young flesh thing." He was alerted by a *Burlington Free Press* article that quoted from one of the booklets.

"One of the most vile aspects of homosexuality is the insatiable lust for new and especially young flesh," reads *The War is Over*. Another sample reads, "Homosexuals refer to their partners as 'my significant other.' What is significant about someone who participates and shares in a sin that makes you worthy of death?"

About 20 people picketed on Sunday November 17th. Smith, a Progressive Coalition legislator from Burlington, received a unanimous endorsement from Burlington's Progressive Coalition Steering Committee. The Burlington Women's Council, which is calling for a boycott, co-sponsored the protest.

"I really want people to know these are not harmless hippies - that they are spreading hate literature," Peggy Luhrs, director of the Women's Council said. "They came to Lesbian/Gay Pride pushing their literature; they're really out there with their stuff. They're anti-homosexual, anti-women... enough ground for a unanimous boycott by the Women's Council." She added, "I'm personally incensed by hate-mongering hiding as religion."

Although members of the Community look like hippies, they don't believe in live-and-let-live, but in a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. From 300 followers in the early 80's, membership has grown to 1,000 world-wide, according to a store spokesperson, who did not want to be identified. Burlington now has 65 members living communally. Other Vermont communities are located in Bellows Falls and Island Pond.

The booklets list stores in Bellows Falls and Lancaster, NH. Everything for sale in the stores is made by the Community'



Photo by Sharon Levin

Left to right, Oak LoGalbo, three unidentified women, Peggy Luhrs, Tom Smith.

cottage industries said a store spokesperson. According to Luhrs, Strictly Vermont products are also carried by some other stores, including Maple Valley in Plainfield.

The Community is one of the few communal families surviving the 60's. Founded by Elbert Eugene Springs in Tennessee in 1972, the group was accused of brainwashing by de-programmers who kidnapped some of their members, according to *The Gospel Time Bomb*, a book on fundamentalist sects. "Media coverage of the de-programmings was so adverse that the group decided to leave Tennessee."

They moved to Island Pond, where a member owned property. The booklets list communities in Massachusetts, Missouri, France, New Zealand, Brazil, and three in Nova Scotia in addition to the three in Vermont.

"We don't want people to go out there and gay-bash," store spokesperson said after the picketing on November 17th. Store workers invited Smith and reporters into the store to sit and talk. "What we write isn't hate literature; it's

not coming from a motive of hatred," a spokesperson said, separating intent from impact. "We believe homosexuality is wrong, immoral and against the will of God. We're not here to be popular, but to stand on the truth." Community members say half the phone calls they received after the *Free Press* article were in support of their stand.

Asked if they don't think that what they write leads to a climate of gay-bashing, the reply was, "Hatred not hate literature led to Auschwitz. We don't speak hatred or incite other people to violence. We're not advocating violence to homosexuals."

A store spokesperson said that they might add that they do not encourage violence against lesbians and gays to the next edition of their pamphlets. He also invited people to "come and talk to us before staging a protest."

Smith and Luhrs plan more picketing of the store in December. For current plans or an update on the issue contact Smith at 862-6262 or Luhrs at the Burlington Women's Council, 658-9300. ▼