

# Opening Doors to Understanding

Dot Brauer

On May 4, 1992, 59 people gathered at Cortina Inn in Mendon, VT, to open a new chapter of history in Vermont. For the first time in Vermont, an alliance of educators and representatives of agencies that serve youth gathered at a conference sponsored by the Department of Education and spent an entire day talking about the need for better support of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in our schools and communities.

The keynote speaker, John Yoakam of the University of Minnesota Adolescent Health Program, spent the morning sensitizing participants to the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, providing statistics from the Minnesota Youth and AIDS Project showing that by the senior year in high school up to 6 percent of youth are sexually active with same sex partners. Following that, Outright Vermont presented a panel which included a member of the Lake Champlain chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and two young people, one a graduate of Saint Michael's College and one a Burlington High School student, Monica Schaner. Monica said about her experience of the conference, "Although it was my first conference, I wasn't as nervous as I thought I'd be. I came to realize that there are some people who care. Those who were in the Department of Education were appalled at my experiences in school and stated to me after the panel that some things were going to change. I now feel better that maybe by going to this conference and telling my story I made it easier for those who follow."

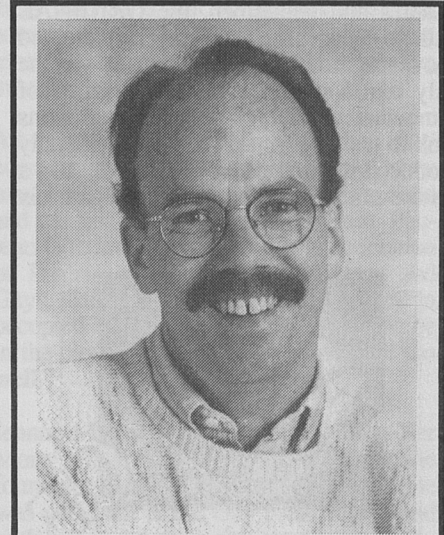
Eric Nichols, Board Chair of Outright Vermont, began the afternoon with a guided imagery exercise. Participants spent the rest of the afternoon in small

groups planning how to make changes in their schools and communities and sharing ideas and resources among the whole group.

Participants included representatives from Hanover High School, Browns River Middle School, Cannan Memorial School, Fair Haven Union High School, Central Elementary School, Lamoille Union High School, Wilmington High School, Burlington School District, Montpelier High School, Milton High School, People's Academy, South Burlington High School, Springfield High School, Mt. Abraham Union High School, Beeman Elementary School, Vergennes UESD #44, North Country Jr. High School, Addison Northwest Supervisory Union, Burlington High School, Mt. Anthony Jr. High School, and Barre City Elementary High School. The agencies represented included Outright Vermont, the Vermont Department of Education, the Agency of Human Services, Planned Parenthood of NNE, the Family Unity Service System, and the University of Vermont Wellness and Promotion.

The conference was considered an overwhelming success as a first step by the participants, the organizers and the Department of Education. Outright organizers are encouraged about the prospect of creating an ongoing advisory network of educators and service providers throughout the state. The conference planning committee will be meeting this summer to begin talking about next steps.

For more information about the conference and what can be done in your local school, contact the Vermont Department of Education or Outright Vermont, PO Box 5235, Burlington, VT 05402, (802) 865-9677. ▼



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