

# VT NEA Supports Gay Students & Educators

Carol

Although some gay and lesbian educators are out at work, the majority remain closeted. As a member of the latter group, I found an article in the May 1992 issue of the *Vermont NEA Today* newsletter to be of particular interest. Barbara Barbour, a Vermont teacher and newly appointed representative to the National Education Association's Civil Rights Committee, outlined the committee's recommendations in the area of sexual orientation biases. The committee stressed the importance of sensitizing all members to the needs of gay and lesbian education employees and students via training at the national and state levels. Other recommendations included publication of articles on sexual orientation in the NEA's national newsletter and assistance to local affiliates regarding contract language and school district and higher education policy addressing civil rights, equal access to employment benefits and hiring practices as related to sexual orientation. Said Barbour, "It is very difficult for gay and lesbian teachers to stand up for their rights and the rights of gay and lesbian students. We could, however, all stand up as teachers to protect the rights of all teachers and students no matter their race, religion, handicapping condition, gender, or sexual orientation."

The August/September issue of *Vermont NEA Today* included an article which spoke to the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual students in Vermont. Marilyn Gillis and Jeff Lavin, having attended a three-day NEA conference in Washington, D.C., "Affording Equal Opportunity to Gay and

Lesbian Students Through Teaching and Counseling", advised readers of the critical need to recognize and to help these students. Due to their significantly higher risk to fail, drop out, runaway from home, engage in substance abuse, or commit suicide, "...gay and lesbian kids are being destroyed by the thousands." Gillis and Lavin wanted to increase the visibility of this problem, and reviewed five assumptions presented at the national conference: 1. Gay, lesbian and bisexual persons are present in our classrooms and faculty rooms. 2. Every student deserves a safe environment in school. 3. Professionals in education need accurate information and specific skills. 4. The only way to know another person's sexual orientation is if that person divulges it. 5. Not everyone will accept assumptions 1 - 4. They invited all NEA members to attend a free all day workshop in October.

Sure enough, the front page of the October issue of *Vermont NEA Today* directed readers to page 8 to find out about "Equity for gay and lesbian students." Convinced that all of this was evidence of a groundswell of support among my colleagues, I attended the October 17 workshop in Berlin, VT. Charles Duzinski, Vice-President of the Vermont NEA, read opening remarks which reminded us why we were there. The workshop goals and objectives provided further clarification: "To increase the level of awareness of school employees about the educational and psychological needs of gay and lesbian students and to enhance the ability of all school employees

to ensure that these students receive an equal educational opportunity."

The conference organizers expressed their concern that they might be preaching to the converted, but perhaps that was not such a bad starting point. The day featured small and large group discussion; viewing of a tape of a 20/20 segment on gay, lesbian and bisexual students; David Wolk as a keynote luncheon speaker; and a panel discussion facilitated by Dot Brauer of Outright Vermont. Despite the fact that it was a Saturday, no one appeared anxious to leave, and the conference ran slightly over the scheduled time. Lots of talking, listening and networking took place. It was wonderful to feel such empathy and support for gay, lesbian and bisexual educators and students. If this is a groundswell, I'd like to be part of it, and encourage others to join.

As a next step, the conference organizers would like to be available to school districts in Vermont that would like workshops or presentations on this topic. For more information contact Marilyn Gillis in Milton at 863-5308 or Jeff Lavin in Springfield at 263-5228. Educators may also be interested in the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the National Education Association (established in 1987). The address is: NEA/GLC, P.O. Box 314, Roosevelt, NJ 08555. Barbara Barbour would like to start a Vermont chapter of the NEA/GLB Caucus. She invites those interested to contact her at 436-2038. ▼

## Where to Find OITM

Bennington Free Library	Bennington	Project EXCEL, Lyndon State College	Lyndonville
Brattleboro Food Coop	Brattleboro	Northshire Bookstore	Manchester Center
Cahoots	Brattleboro	Middlebury Natural Food Coop	Middlebury
Common Ground	Brattleboro	Bear Pond Books	Montpelier
Everyone's Books	Brattleboro	Horn of the Moon Cafe	Montpelier
Burlington College	Burlington	Woman Centered	Montpelier
Chassman & Bem	Burlington	Morristown Centennial Library	Morrisville
Fletcher Free Library	Burlington	Moore Free Library	Newfane
Partners in Recovery & Growth	Burlington	Northeast Kingdom AIDS Coalition	Newport
Peace & Justice Center	Burlington	Brown Public Library	Northfield
Pearls	Burlington	Social Alternatives for Gay Men	Norwich
Planned Parenthood	Burlington	Woman's Study Program	Plainfield
STEP Learning Center	Burlington	Putney Library	Putney
Craftsbury Public Library	Castleton	Kimball Public Library	Randolph
Rutland Area Gay/Lesbian Connection	Craftsbury	PFLAG	Rutland
Innwood Manor	Center Rutland	Rutland Free Library	Rutland
Greenhope Farm	East Barret	LUNA/NEVGALR c/o Umbrella	St. Johnsbury
Fair Haven Free Library	East Hardwick	Natural Provisions	St. Johnsbury
Buffalo Mountain Coop	Fair Haven	Regional Library	St. Johnsbury
Galaxy Books	Hardwick	St. Johnsbury Athenaeum	St. Johnsbury
Jon's Automotive	Hardwick	Food for Thought	Stowe
	Lyndonville	WRJ Books	White River Junction
		Upper Valley Coop	White River Junction