

Out in the Mountains

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Every Person Affirmed: New England-wide conference draws over 250 to Keene, NH



"My take ... is that everything HIV is not all about doom and gloom. To say the words HIV and AIDS and address it as a reality is a positive step because you are facing a crisis. And then addressing issues around prevention, education, and support for people infected with HIV is affirming. It's affirming the individual and affirming the community. ... People with HIV are any of us and we are all worthy of dignity and respect."

Bruce:

KEENE, NH -- Affirming Every Person, the New England-wide conference for and about lesbians and gay men, was held February 10 - 12 on the campus of Keene State College in Keene, NH. The conference was cooperatively sponsored by The Keene Unitarian Universalist Church, Keene State College, and Antioch New England Graduate School.

Of the 35 workshops offered over the three-day conference, four were either presented or facilitated by Vermonters. Here is what they had to say...

Carey Johnson, Education Coordinator for the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project, facilitated a workshop entitled **Stories To Tell: People Living With HIV**, a panel presentation of individuals sharing their experiences of living with HIV. Pictured (back row, l-r) are panelist Bruce from Bennington, Carey Johnson, panelists David from Keene, NH, Scott from Brattleboro, and (front row) Lisa with her son John.

Carey:

"The theme of the conference, 'Affirming Every Person', is about supporting people ... and making that something that we can all feel good about both collectively and individually. My interest in doing this particular panel was ... bringing people together, people infected by HIV, people affected by HIV, to talk to one another.

"(However) there was resistance on behalf of the organizers (of the conference) to have issues addressing concerns such as HIV here ... According to the organizers ... the purpose of the conference was not to 'promote sex' or focus on the pathology of the gay community. In their minds, I think they have the impression that to bring attention to HIV and AIDS may focus on what others consider to be the negative aspects of (the gay community).

"I do a lot (of speaking) with high school children and they are usually receptive. They listen to what you have to say. If by the end of something like this, if you feel you've gotten your message across, you've touched someone, then you feel good. A lot of times you'll talk to a complete knucklehead that you know isn't listening and isn't going to listen. That can cause some rage sometimes. You can get real angry at people. ... This is a disease that is passed by ignorance. A lot of times, somebody'll say, 'Well, if I get it, I would blame this person or blame that one.' You can only blame yourself. If you caught it, it's your fault."

David:

"(I hope to) teach people to understand what we are going through. Just because we don't look sick doesn't mean that we are not sick. People need to realize that we need their compassion, their help, and their understanding."

Lisa:

"For me, I feel empowered ... sometimes I feel drained (when I talk about my experiences). It all depends on the audience. With kids, who I've spoken to a lot, I walk away feeling kind of exhilarated, like maybe I've had a purpose ... A lot of times the kids ask fabulous questions. They really want to know and they are very eager to learn and to accept people. They're real. It's grown-ups I have a lot of troubles with sometimes because they are very stuck in their ways and their attitudes.

"I'm not dying from HIV, I'm living with it. It's enhanced my life. It's given me back my life, and I don't think it has taken anything from me. It has given to me. I have come across some real assholes in my life, but I look at that as ignorance. Anybody that knows me is privileged because I'm a great person."

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Charles Emond, (see picture on page 9) who facilitated the workshop entitled **Gay History: Stonehenge to Stonewall**, teaches the course "Hidden History: Homosexuality and Western Civilization" at the Community College of Vermont, White River Junction

"There's a general movement toward empowering gay and lesbian people. To empower people you really have to identify the people, and I think history helps to do that. It helps to identify who we are as a group. ... I've been teaching 'Foundations of Western Civilization' for an eternity ... As I've gone along, I've become more and more aware of the place of gay and lesbian people in the course of western civilization.

"One of the cries that you hear, especially in the early part of this century in the United States is, 'I thought I was the only one. I thought it was just me.' There was no sense of community. There was no sense of other people feeling or being the same way. It's hard to imagine that today. Things have really opened up and you can see us everywhere, which in fact we always were ... Realizing that you're not the only one, even through history, is empowering.

"In teaching people who are not gay, when I bring up (gay and lesbian history) in my Western Civilization class, ... I sometimes get a ... look of shock tinged with disgust. ... But I take pains to explain why I am bringing (up the topic). ... I generally say (that) history wasn't just made by white Christian men - that there were women there, that there were minorities there, and that (gays and lesbians) were there as well.

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VCLGR-TV: Statewide community meets via Interactive Television



Bennett Law

RANDOLPH CENTER -- The Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VCLGR) opened its spring "Fourth Friday" series February 24th with a program discussing the rise of the Religious Right in Vermont. The program, chaired by Coalition Co-Chair Mary Hurlie of Hinesburg, brought 50 men and women at seven sites around the state together via Vermont Interactive Television.

The first portion of the program centered around a presentation from South Burlington by Peggy Luhrs, Burlington Women's Council Executive Director, about who the Religious Right is, where we are likely to encounter them in Vermont, and how we might best address their tactics.

Participants at the Brattleboro site spoke about a reluctance to perpetuate the label "Religious Right" out of concern that the political pairing of these terms might be a disservice to some who are religious, though perhaps political moderates or left-leaning, or to those who are solidly right-wing but may not share a religious affiliation. Luhrs commented that studies suggest that those people who are

generally perceived as part of the Religious Right self-identify under that moniker.

Program participants at the different sites around Vermont read lists of those individuals, groups, and organizations that each identified as part of the Religious Right. Most participants shared a common perception of who the leaders of the Religious Right are on the national level: Pat Robertson and The Christian Coalition, Randall Terry and Operation Rescue, Phyllis Schlafly and Eagle Forum, James Dobson and Focus on the Family, Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell, Pistol and Gun Associations, and assorted religious groups (including the Catholic and Southern Baptist Churches, Christian Fundamentalists, The Mormon Church, and the Church of Scientology).

Participants then explored where elements of the Religious Right could be found in Vermont, including the newly forming Christian Coalition of Orleans County, Waterbury radio station WGLY ("God Loves You"), the White Mountain Militia out of Lebanon, NH, and local

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OITM HISTORY: April Through The Years

1987 ... H.247 Prohibiting Discrimination Debated In a historic first, a public hearing was held by the Judiciary Committee of the Vermont House of Representatives on H.247, a bill that would add the term "affectional or sexual orientation" to the list of prohibited discrimination. This was the first time that the issue of equal rights for gay men and lesbians has been openly discussed within the legislature.

1992 ... Twenty Hours and Counting With weary but stalwart hearts, several hundred gay community supporters gathered February 27 in Montpelier for a fourth marathon public hearing on the merits of civil rights for gay and lesbian Vermonters, legislatively reincarnated this year in Senate Bill S.131 and House Bill H.162.

1994 ... The Right Response: The Blues of VT Recognizes Domestic Partnerships On January 1, 1994, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Vermont, one of the state's top health insurance companies, began offering domestic partnership benefits to its employees. According to Karen Saudek, Director of Human Resources for Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Vermont, her company is merely reflecting the fact that "the definition of family has broadened."