

LOOKING BOTH WAYS: On Fitting In

Mike Rothbart

CUTTINGSVILLE -- Rutland is no place for a queer man. Not that this prevents some of us from living there. It's just not particularly welcoming. Rutland is a real red, white and blue town: Caucasians, rednecks and blue collars. I spent a recent evening downtown with my friend David, a six foot tall black juggler with a mohawk. We passed the time in the cultural center in the heart of Rutland - the Kmart parking lot. We sat on a bench sipping our Pepsi from brown paper bags, watching the locals. Until we realized they were watching us. In fact, they did more than watch us; they were approaching. Fast. With menacing looks in their high school "I-have-an-attitude" eyes. This group of young punks, Rutland's future selectmen and chamber of commerce businessmen, kindly and politely inquired as to what the fuck we were doing there. They made it clear that we were entirely welcome there - as soon as we stopped looking queer. One of these gentlemen kindly invited to escort me to his barber, to remove my long tresses. Another offered to introduce David to his old pal, the baseball bat. We declined, and before these friendly locals became any friendlier, we took ourselves for a walk.

In the car, Dave's only question was: "What in the world am I doing here? This state is whiter than Wonder bread." I tended to agree, although the White Mountains are actually in New Hampshire. For the first time, I realized that to live in a small town in Vermont and not fit in can be hazardous to my health. Much of my life, I've been proud of my ability to be outstanding. Or at least, to stand out. At my college graduation, I decided to wear a maroon cap and gown. Everyone else wore the standard black. My mom was grateful; she said it made me easier to see. My dad complained that I looked like the one penguin with a bowtie in a Far Side cartoon. Regardless, I was just happy to have another chance to be unique.

I may have been inspired by a mural in my high school. Splayed across the wall by the front office was a twenty foot high painting of zebras, a herd of equines in zebra-striped suits faced the stairwell. Amidst them stood one zebra dressed in paisley rainbows and purple polka dots. Beneath it, in fancy black calligraphy, was an inspirational message. Something like: "Be yourself!" or "Take the road less traveled," or perhaps "Hey, Marvin, you clash!" I've been fond of clashing ever since. Especially when I can clash with people's expectations. Unfortunately, those Rutland youth apparently had not benefitted from the zebra mural.

I like to wear skirts. An English professor of mine used to call this "a subversive deconstruction of the pejorative normative cultural values through demarcating and performing a minority aesthetic of resistance." I just call it "wearing a skirt." It makes me feel free, those bare legs beneath fancy silk wraps. I prefer loose skirts that swirl around my legs when I dance. It gives me a queer thrill to prance around in female clothes like your prototypical daisy-behind-the-ear Radical Faerie.

From high school, I recall my first discovery of the joy of being a misfit. I would ride around town with my friend Craig in his huge tank-sized pickup truck: four wheel drive, gun rack, black leather jackets, cigarettes, elbows out the windows. As we drove, we blared our favorite music at full volume. That is, we blared Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." I remember the jarred expressions on the faces of other drivers as we passed, their brains straining to integrate conceptions of teenage punks and classical music. For Craig was both, a troubled adolescent shoplifter and an impressive virtuoso violinist. That experience points to what I value about subversive activity. It tears apart your expectations of how things are in the world, and reintegrates them in a manner that nothing else but good fiction or foreign travel can do. And that, finally, is why I wear skirts: I thrive on the puzzled looks of passersby. In their eyes sometimes I can see that I am challenging their assumptions of the world.

Sadly though, I get few chances to wear my dresses in this state. It remains vital to my continued survival that I don't wear them in too many public places. My run-in with the rowdy Rutland roustabouts proved this to me. That particular evening, I was wearing nothing more startling than lace underwear - hidden under blue jeans. My long hair was enough to set these juveniles off. It always amazes me how swiftly and forcefully society squelches the transgression of any social taboo. Cultural values - like which clothing is appropriate for men - are deeply instilled and widely promulgated, and reactions against those who break from the mold are more visceral than rational. It is those of us who stand out, like David with his mohawk, who bear the brunt of these constrictions. Many of us queers stand out just by being who we are.

I swore once that I would never limit myself based on the pressures of those around me. Nevertheless, I find I do it all the time, putting on jeans for yet another day. For as thrilling as it is to break people's expectations, it can be quite lonely too. It gets hard to always be the odd one out. And so who knows - someday soon I actually may buy myself that three-piece suit. I might even wear it.

Mike Rothbart lives in Cuttingsville, where his favorite dress is currently collecting dust. He thinks it would be fun to be a fashion activist, especially if someone would pay him to do it. ▼

Bisexual Community Meets

Hugh Coyle

PUTNEY -- While spring buds began to blossom around the state, Vermont's bisexual community busied itself with two regional meetings.

On Saturday, May 6, a meeting of the Northeast Bisexual Community was held in Putney at the Putney Friends Meeting House. Sponsored by the National Bisexual Network (BiNet USA), the afternoon gathering attracted twenty-eight people. Many of those in attendance stayed on for dinner afterward at Common Ground in Brattleboro.

Discussions centered around developing a community plan for Vermont and identifying regional resources. Small groups targeted four areas for closer examination: relationships, coming out and labeling, race and class issues, and community organizing.

Issues of definition and identity, both inside and outside the bisexual community, emerged in nearly all of the discussions. The groups looked at ways that bisexuals can empower themselves and one another, and in the process help overcome the barriers often placed by society around issues of sexuality.

These thoughts carried over into the large group discussion, which looked more closely at establishing a significant bisexual presence within the state. Suggestions included monthly meetings around the state (perhaps via interactive TV), a regular column in *Out in the Mountains*, and increased visibility at the annual Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VCLGR) conference.

The group also elected a new representative to BiNet USA since Stephanie Berger was leaving her position. Rifka Reichler was chosen as the new co-representative (Kirsten Isgro will continue as the other representative); Jennifer Wilkes was named an alternate.

Two weeks after the regional meeting, another major bisexual event took place here in New England. On May 19-21, Northeastern University in Boston hosted the 6th Northeast Regional Conference on Bisexuality.

Several hundred bisexual people gathered to share their thoughts and insights in a number of workshops, then moved on to somewhat less cerebral activities such as a dance and an erotic story-telling session.

The event was sponsored by the Bisexual Resource Center, NUBILAGA, the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, and Biversity Boston. ▼

Public Hears Daddy's Roommate

Kip M. Roberson

RUTLAND -- A June 6th public hearing highlighted a community divided against itself. Gathered together on a warm and humid evening in the Rutland Free Library's auditorium was a group of individuals so diverse that perhaps only at town meeting would these people meet again. So large was this group that the auditorium, with a seating capacity of 180, spilled out onto the library's front sidewalk with as many as another 180 people waiting their turn to enter. Local, state and national news media were there to cover the hearing and to report on the encroachment of the religious right into areas, such as Vermont, normally perceived as liberal and/or progressive.

The purpose of this hearing was to garner the public's opinion on the Library's existing policy of free and open access to materials. Access was to be the issue and whether or not the library board should place restrictions on certain types of materials. What evolved was not a discussion on access and censorship so much, but rather a discussion about homosexuality and its perceived moral implications.

Karol Raiche asked "Is it wrong to ask the Library to protect the children? Do we teach them that homosexuality is normal and correct? It is our responsibility to try to teach them ... the normalcies of life." And Jeffrie Smith, the pastor of the Living Word Faith Fellowship Church stated, "It's a matter of going against God. These kids don't need this disease. They don't understand it." Still, other speakers attempted to link *Daddy's Roommate* with pornography and AIDS.

Passion ran just as deeply on the other side of the issue. Joni Alexis Fizur said she wished *Daddy's Roommate* had been in the library when she was growing up as the son of an Army Green Beret. "My father tried to influence me to be like him, the macho type. But I had something else going on," said Fizur, a transsexual who said access to information about gender identity might have saved her years of pain. "We've got to have the books out there to educate, no matter what the subject is, no matter what the issue is," she said. Erin Gluckman urged the board to keep the book on open shelves because, "I've been living with my lesbian mother and her partner for six years and I have not been corrupted. I like men. I did not choose to be straight, just as my mother did not choose to be a lesbian."

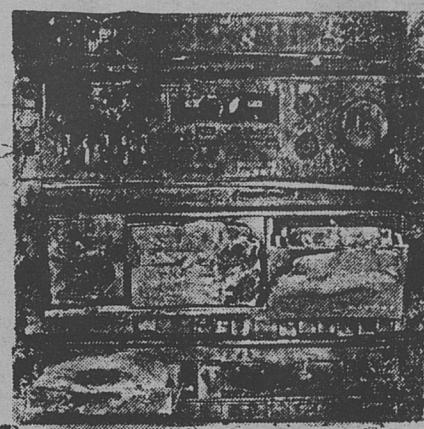
In what was perhaps the evening's most poignant statement, ten-year-old Jennifer Archer said the issue was neither homosexuality nor censorship. "Personally, I think if you put the books on a higher shelf, children will want to read them. Because it's forbidden, children will want to read them even more," Archer said.

The Board, meeting on June 14th, demonstrated a belief in the Freedom to Read Statement and voted to keep *Daddy's Roommate* on the shelves of the children's room where access is open to all. *Art Forum*, *Out*, and *OITM* will also remain on the open periodical shelves. However, the Board formed two committees to further study the existing policies regarding selection of children's materials and the classification and/or placement of such. Also to be studied will be the Library's policy regarding access to R-rated videos; at present, access is not restricted based upon age. The committees will be working throughout the summer with results expected by fall. ▼

HOWDEN COTTAGE

bed & breakfast

Continental • No Smoking • By Reservation Only
32 No. Champlain St. • Burlington, VT 05401
Bruce M. Howden • Proprietor • 802 864-7198



If you don't think you
need renters insurance, this
could change your tune.

All it takes is one fire. Don't take chances. You're in good hands.
with what you've accumulated. Call me. Allstate

863-3808

Ellen Heatherington
130 Prim Road • Colchester, VT 05446

© 1994 Allstate Insurance Company, Northbrook, Illinois. Subject to policy terms, conditions and coverages.

BMIH
graphic design & printing

32 N. Champlain St. Burlington VT. 05401

802/864 • 7198 • FAX 802/658 • 1556