

VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS: Leaders and the Community They Lead

Terje Anderson

BURLINGTON -- Several years ago, I was taken aback when an article in the *Burlington Free Press* called me "the unofficial leader of Burlington's gay community." This ersatz title, bestowed by a newspaper outside of our community, troubled me greatly at the time.

What right did they (or anyone else) have to designate who spoke for our community? I held no offices in any community organization, hadn't been elected by our community to speak for anyone, and hadn't asked for any of the responsibility that went with such a title. Why me? Weren't there plenty of other men and women in the community equally or more capable of speaking for us?

Out of this, a fundamental question emerged for me, one with which I still struggle: what is the relationship between "leaders" and the community they lead? It is a question that has special resonance for the g/l/b/t community, where the closet and diversity create special challenges in the development, maintenance and accountability of our leadership.

The *Free Press* had it wrong -- while I acknowledge that I am a leader in the community, I could not be considered the leader, in Burlington or elsewhere. Our community has never truly spoken with a single voice, and probably never should or will.

It is easy sometimes to think of leadership in a narrow capacity, mistaking political leadership for overall community leadership. As a community struggling for recognition of our civil rights, it is not surprising that has happened -- much of our energy has gone into political organizing, and the people who have emerged as visible spokespeople have been the activists working for civil rights. These individuals are accepted by the media, the straight power structure and, at times, our own community as our "leaders."

Yet the reality is that most people in the g/l/b/t community are not prepared to follow these political leaders: politics is not the focus of their identity. Those of us who are activists, who live and breathe this stuff, all too often forget that most people have neither time, nor energy, neither resources nor interest to participate in the "political" life of the community.

Perhaps even more than in any other community, our leadership is a self-selected group, consisting largely of those most able to occupy leadership positions: out of the closet, educated, reasonably financially secure individuals with the means, time and willingness to become involved. Those of us in leadership need to remember that our needs and our views do not necessarily reflect those of the diverse "silent majority" of our community. Despite this, we frequently present ourselves as speaking for that mythical ten percent of the population we call our constituency.

There is a clear and frustrating gulf between our "leadership" and our "rank and file." The overwhelming majority of g/l/b/t Vermonters do not belong to community organizations, do not read *Out in the Mountains*, do not march in June, do not attend committee meetings or legislative hearings, and do not think of the "movement" as their movement.

All too often, I hear community members dismiss those in leadership, assuming that the long hours and hard work are all "ego trips," "power grabbing," or based in an effort to impose "left-wing ideology." They grumble, without offering to get involved themselves, that they don't like the way things are being done at the Coalition or Pride or *Out in the Mountains* or whatever other community institution is their target.

Just as disturbing, I hear people in the leadership of our community bemoan "apathy," "indifference," "conservatism," "shallowness" or "apoliticalness" as stumbling blocks to getting done what desperately needs to be done. Unfortunately, the tone is one of derision or dismissiveness for those not so "enlightened" or "advanced" as the leaders.

Like most other Americans, the majority of our community will never be obsessed with the narrow political issues that preoccupy much of our leadership elite. Yet our leaders, including myself, have been seemingly fixated on making the political and legal gains necessary to securing a safer environment for people to live and come out, often ignoring the very immediate needs that people have in their lives for mutual support, culture, and community.

That great void of meaning that people feel in our all too alienating world has given the fundamentalist Christian right an incredibly effective organizing tool. They speak to the longing for belonging that people feel, and offer them, in the form of a simplistic world view, a vision of hope and safety. Some creative thinkers on the left have recognized the need to create a "politics of meaning" which speaks to these needs without the hateful edge of the Christian right.

The g/l/b/t leadership would do well to learn the same lesson; living in a homophobic world, our community members (including leaders themselves) desperately need a place of safety and caring, institutions and activities and networks that nurture and sustain us. Feminism presented us with the radical idea that "the personal is political" and analyzed the content of our lives for their political implications. We must build on that idea by recognizing as well that "the political is personal," and create a movement that touches the daily lives of all members of our community.

Alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, suicide, AIDS, self-hatred, and other ills all take an immense toll on our community; and in many ways each of them can be attributed directly to the realities of a hostile world we face daily. No law will ever fix these, and those of us in leadership have the obligation to struggle against them as hard as we fight against Jesse Helms. They are both integral parts of the struggle.

I do not suggest that we drop our efforts for legal and political equality, but we must recognize that the struggle will never be successful without the tools in place to create a strong, self-confident, healthy community. Could the African-American civil rights movement have come as far as it did within a fundamentally racist society without the bedrock role played by the black family and the black church? It was no accident that the black church produced a leader, Martin Luther King Jr.,

who came to symbolize the battle for equality. Can anyone name an institution within our community capable of producing a Dr. King?

In many ways, we have been very well served by the leadership of our community in Vermont. Without the hard (and largely unrecognized) work of a relatively small handful of people, we would not have achieved the political and legislative gains that have put us first in the country in terms of legal protections. These make a real difference in the daily lives of g/l/b/t Vermonters. These people deserve our thanks in ways we will never adequately express.

Yet the time has come for those of us in leadership to pause and begin a discussion -- a discussion with a broad cross-section of our community about what they want and expect and need now that legislative victories have been won, a discussion of how our organizations, institutions and our movement can be made more relevant to real lives of g/l/b/t Vermonters.

Terje Anderson is currently the Vermont Department of Health Program Chief. He is also one of the founders of Out In The Mountains.

All readers are encouraged to take their turn at the editorial bat and let their voices be heard on the topic of their choice. Send articles/columns of 1000 words or less to *Out In The Mountains*, P.O. Box 177, Burlington, VT 05402, or via the Internet at OutVermont@aol.com. ▼

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strengthen Albany's human rights law, expanding basic civil rights protections for gays and lesbians; the legislation was enacted into law in December of 1992. In June of 1993, Governor Mario Cuomo presented Alderman St. John with a Certificate of Merit for his advocacy on behalf of gay men and lesbians.

Although the space was tight, one popular aspect of last year's conference was the street carnival atmosphere in the main meeting area. This year, that same atmosphere will be expanded to include not only organization information booths and merchandise vendors, but food vendors and carnival booths as well. Attendees will enjoy shopping and dining while meeting old friends and making new ones in the main court throughout the day. This space can also be used for the purpose of networking.

As in years past, the conference will end with the annual meeting of the membership of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights. In the Vermont tradition, the Queer Town Meeting provides an opportunity for the leadership of the Coalition to report to the membership, and the membership to voice concerns, opinions, and express thanks to the leadership and the community at large.

Montpelier High School is fully wheelchair accessible. ASL interpretation and child care are available to those who pre-register by October 15th. Separate evening events are planned in Montpelier. The VCLGR Conference is made possible by an all-volunteer staff, and further help is always needed. For more information or to volunteer, call Laurie at 223-8962 or Dudley at 889-9413. ▼

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