

## Lead On: An Exploration of Leadership in the Community, Part 2

Bennett Law

**BETHEL** -- "What does our community need from our leaders? Leadership. I think this means a willingness to take positions and nurture dialog. Our leaders need to offer a clear analysis and strategies for action." (Joy Livingston, Hinesburg)

The g/l/b/t community, like the wider community, seeks effective, representative leadership. In Part 2 of *OITM's* leadership survey, participants offer their insights and ideas about how strong, new leaders may be developed.

### Raise Awareness

Which came first -- the community or its leaders? Strong leaders build a stronger community, while a stronger community fosters stronger leaders. "I am very distressed by the recent trend in the lesbian and gay community to equate building community with political action. They are not the same thing," Joy Livingston went on to comment. But most of the other respondents suggested that the clearest path to improving our community leadership, political and non-political, is to nurture the creation of a thriving, active community that will be attractive to both new participants as well as potential leaders.

"We need to be more socially responsible about how we present ourselves." (anon.) Many suggested we raise public awareness of the contributions that the g/l/b/t community, both as individuals and through political and social organizations, already makes to a healthy Vermont. "We need to continue creating role models, and finding ways to spread the good news about them, to make them visible to other individuals in other corners of the state. That way, we can inspire our future leaders to step forward, to show them that even though it takes a lot of courage, the rewards go beyond imagination." (Hugh Coyle, Ripton)

As Kirsten Isgro of Burlington commented, "There is something to be said for gay organizations that sustain some visibility." The ever-increasing professionalism of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VCLGR) and its heightened profile, both in the legislative arena and within the g/l/b/t community, the undaunted commitment of our AIDS service organizations around the state, and the stability and statewide representation sustained by *OITM* were cited as positive reflections of our community, in which we can all readily take pride.

### Be Out

Our finest work, inside and outside the g/l/b/t community, does nothing to strengthen or enhance the image of our community unless the participants are out and their sexuality is acknowledged. "We need more people willing to stand up and be out. In Vermont, neighbors know neighbors and individuals appearing publicly can have a large impact. 'Letters to the Editor' make a difference in this state. More people need to take these actions and these actions have to be treated as important. We need folks to take on organizing the l/g/b/t community in their neck of the woods in order to help raise awareness within and without the l/g/b/t community of our issues and dispel the myth that straight people don't know any gays." (Susan Aranoff, Randolph)

"I see a need for our leaders to be out in the world and talking about and pushing for issues that are not just gay-related. We need to assimilate ourselves into the larger picture by just assuming our rightful places there." (anon.)

"There were/are good role models for members of our community ... Terje Anderson's activity in national politics, Keith Goslant being our statewide spokesperson, and Howdy Russell not only speaking out but seeking out votes on a local level ... If my openness and activity can help someone else participate, just as I was/am inspired by Terje, Keith and Howdy, we all come out ahead." (Bob Bolyard, Burlington)

### Nurture Youth

One largely untapped, and somewhat controversial, source of new energy for our community is Vermont's youth. "It would behoove Vermont to include our colleges more. These are the young people -- in the future they will be taking leadership roles. What it means to be a 20 year old queer is different from what it means to be a 30 or 40 year old g/l/b person." (Kirsten Isgro, Burlington)

"We would be well served to incorporate younger people into the leadership process. Just as the prototypical American dream is about giving your kids a better life than you had, I feel the same way about kids growing up gay. I want them to be freer to express themselves and develop in a natural, non-stigmatized way. Insuring healthy development from an early age is to me the logical next step in strengthening our community." (Chris Tebbets, Burlington)

"We need to be able to train young men and women for leadership roles but we are hampered by the fear of playing into the accusations of child recruitment. Our distance from the young leaders out there is further complicated by the generational differences. We are unwilling or unable to make social/political connections with each other to learn from and share our lives." (Dudley, Strafford)

### Develop Community

The participants stressed that our community has to be more welcoming of new participants. Some felt that their involvement in the community was treated as suspect by more established leaders who believed they hadn't "paid their dues to the community." One even spoke of being "tired of having to fight just to participate."

"We tend to be insensitive to many people's lack of confidence or lack of interest in 'political' things; for example, asking a person whose job does not allow him or her to be out, or whose interests lie in areas other than politics, to spend time talking to and lobbying legislators is unrealistic, insensitive, and bound to fail. I think established leaders must be sensitive to the fact that, for many new leaders, the mere fact of stepping forward, of volunteering, is not the 'end' of the process for that person, but rather the beginning. We cannot assume an equal knowledge of g/l politics, history, lobbying practices, etc. What we must do, however, is pay close attention to new members, asking them what interests them, what they'd like to work on, and then providing the means for those persons to work on those matters." Existing leaders must guide new participants toward "specific, discrete tasks in areas of interest to them." (Susan Murray, Ferrisburg)

"We need to increase our grassroots support by offering events and activities that appeal to a broad range of people and offer safe space for those newly out. Often our leaders and our community events may seem too out, too intimidating, too threatening for many people who choose not to be visible or vocal, but who are still part of our community by definition of their sexual orientation. We need to provide ways of involving people that are simple and fun, then find ways to nurture them and encourage them to take on more." (Dudley, Strafford)

### Establish Worth

"I think we need to recognize the work that our current leaders are doing in some kind of public way. There are so few of them and they work so hard for us." (anon.)

VCLGR has taken the initiative on this issue, recently presenting its first annual leadership awards. At its Conference and Annual Queer Town Meeting in Montpelier on October 28th, the Coalition presented its VCLGR Volunteer of the Year Award, the Pride Award (to someone who through an act of courage embodies the spirit of Gay Pride), and the Leadership Award (for distinguished long-term commitment to the community).

According to respondents, we also need to value our own contributions, and recognize the intrinsic value of our efforts. "I remember something that Howdy Russell once said in a presentation he was giving. He said that if we don't start valuing the work that we do -- and by that he meant placing an actual price on it and asking others to respect that -- then others won't see our work as valuable either. He spoke of charging schools and universities for presentations on gay and lesbian issues rather than doing them for free 'out of the goodness of our hearts' or 'in the spirit of the cause.' We are worth something in this world, and we need to be treated as such, whether that be in political, social, or financial terms." (Hugh Coyle, Ripton)

Valuing our work and the work of our leadership extends to providing financial support, as well as emotional and social support. "The community as a whole needs to support its organizations more. Our organizations are hamstrung by lack of funds. Fliers cost money, rooms need to be rented, etc. People who lack time to get involved or who are worried about being too visible really can make a huge difference with financial support." (Susan Aranoff, Randolph)

### Come Together

"Our organizations need to support each other more and share skills, resources, information better ... so that we have a synergistic effect on each other, not a draining effect." (Susan Aranoff, Randolph)

"I think we spend far too little time getting to know who our co-workers and community members really are. Boards and staff spend time struggling with issues or planning events but devote little time to getting to know each other in a way that could allow for personal growth and change that cannot help but be beneficial to the causes we work for. We need to spend less time in meetings and more time with the community at large, getting to know what people really want from our organizations rather than what we think is best." (Dudley, Strafford)

"Many of the successes have come with the best Vermont has to offer, which is a small group of people coming together to work for the common good. It's knowing one another as individuals that has overcome conflicts, passed legislation, and formed support networks." (John Calvi, Putney)

"It begins with one person deciding to get involved. One person deciding to take on a personal challenge. To meet new people. To make a difference." (Bob Bolyard, Burlington) ▼

## Where to find *OITM*

**Barre**  
Pen Dragon

**Bennington**  
Bennington Free Library  
Bennington College  
Bennington Library  
Record Rack  
Southern Vermont College

**Boston, MA**  
Glad Day Bookshop  
We Think the World of You

**Brattleboro**  
Book Cellar  
Brattleboro Food Coop  
Collected Works  
Common Ground  
Everyone's Books

**Burlington**  
Burlington College  
Chassman & Bem  
Fletcher Free Library  
Hot Shots  
Onion River Co-op  
Partners in Recovery & Growth  
Peace & Justice Center  
Pearls  
Planned Parenthood

**Castleton**  
STEP Learning Center

**Chester**  
Misty Valley Books Chester

**Craftsbury**  
Craftsbury Public Library

**Center Rutland**  
Rutland Area  
Gay/Lesbian Connection

**East Dover**  
Dover Free Library

**East Hardwick**  
Greenhope Farm

**Fair Haven**  
Fair Haven Free Library

**Hardwick**  
Buffalo Mountain Coop  
Galaxy Books

**Keene, NH**  
Unitarian Universalist Church

**Lyndonville**  
Jon's Automotive  
Project EXCEL,  
Lyndon State College

**Manchester Center**  
Northshire Bookstore

**Marshfield**  
Jaquith Public Library

**Middlebury**  
Addison County Women in Crisis  
Ilseley Public Library  
Middlebury Natural Food Coop  
Storm Cafe

**Montpelier**  
Bear Pond Books  
Horn of the Moon Cafe  
Rivendell Books  
Woman Centered

**Morrisville**  
Morristown Centennial Library

**Newfane**  
Moore Free Library

**New York City**  
Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop

**Northfield**  
Brown Public Library

**Norwich**  
Social Alternatives for Gay Men

**Plainfield**  
Woman's Study Program

**Putney**  
Putney Library

**Randolph**  
Kimball Public Library

**Rutland**  
PFLAG  
Rutland Free Library  
United Methodist Church  
Grace Cong. United Church of Christ

**St. Johnsbury**  
LUNA/NEVGALR c/o Umbrella  
Natural Provisions  
Regional Library  
St. Johnsbury Athenaeum

**South Burlington**  
South Burlington Community Library

**Stowe**  
Food for Thought

**Waterbury**  
Video Exchange

**White River Junction**  
WRJ Books  
Upper Valley Coop

**Williamstown, MA**  
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