

VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS:

"As a gay Republican ..."

Kevin Anderson

BURLINGTON -- As a gay Republican, I am writing this to speak out about how the gay community in Vermont is dealing with Republicans who are gay or are supportive of gay rights. This issue really came into focus for me because of the controversy surrounding Pride Day last summer and the subsequent reactions from our gay community. At first, I was disappointed with what happened. But since then, I have found that some good has resulted even though I still disagree with how Pride Day was handled.

Last summer, I felt as though I was being rejected by the gay community when I first heard "Queers and Friends Fight The Right" as the theme for the Pride Day activities. On a day when as many people as possible should be included, the theme was driving people like me away.

As a Republican, I consider myself a part of "The Right" -- I support positions which favor a smaller government, lower taxes, individual responsibility, welfare reform, and a host of other issues that are commonly advocated by "The Right." The people who selected this theme may very well have strong views that are different from mine, but they should not have allowed their views to bias the selection of a theme that could have united us.

Just as difficult for me was the decision to exclude Lieutenant Governor Barbara Snelling from Pride Day activities after she had received and accepted an invitation to attend. Snelling is supportive of gay issues, and she is in a position to bridge differences or change the views of those who have not been supportive of gay issues in the past. Her role may soon become even more important if she is elected Governor.

I had great trouble understanding why Snelling was not allowed to participate. The rationale I read in *OITM* basically boiled down to guilt by association or stereotyping. 'Because Snelling is a Republican she must be anti-gay.' This is no more true than saying all Democrats are for gay rights. One only need to look at the records of Sen. Leon Graves in Vermont or U.S. Sen. Sam Nunn. Even President Clinton demonstrates he will give up on gay issues if he thinks it's in his best political interest.

There are some Republicans like Sen. Jesse Helms, Pat Buchanan and others who are anti-gay and get more than their fair share of attention as a result of their radical views. But it is also true that many Republican politicians are supportive of gay issues. In Vermont, the Gay Rights Bill and the Hate Crimes Bill both became law with substantial Republican support. Republican legislators are co-sponsors of a current bill that will allow same-sex couples in Vermont to adopt. Republican Senator James Jeffords is a lead sponsor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). The Ryan White (AIDS) Care Act passed the U.S. Senate with nearly unanimous Republican support. Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole recently admitted that his campaign was wrong in returning a contribution from the Log Cabin Republicans, a national gay Republican organization. In fact, Dole and many Republican Senators and Congressmen signed anti-discrimination policies that protect gay employees in their offices. Many Republican Governors like William Weld of Massachusetts,

Pete Wilson of California and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey have advanced controversial gay rights positions in their states. Despite the rhetoric of some homophobic Republicans, many prominent and successful Republican leaders have taken pro-gay stands.

The fallout from the events surrounding Pride Day could have had lasting negative impacts for the Vermont gay community. With Snelling treated the way she was, it could have sent the message to her and other Republican politicians that it is not worth risking a controversial stand for gay rights when the gay community is just going to vilify and reject you because you are a Republican. The "Fight The Right" theme and Snelling rejection could have also alienated gay Republicans like me who should become more actively involved in Vermont's gay community.

To my surprise, the fallout turned out to be different than I expected. Almost without exception, I am impressed with the reaction of the people who submitted their opinions to *OITM*, most indicating that they wish Pride Day had been handled differently. My gay friends and acquaintances have all expressed similar views. Barbara Snelling is handling it well by saying no damage is done. It also appears that the lines of communication between her and the leaders of the gay community have improved.

The one thing that continues to anger me is that obviously pro-gay rights Republicans like Snelling are held to a higher standard before they are accepted as supportive of gay issues. In Snelling's case, she was criticized in *OITM* for not playing enough of a public role with gay issues. I don't recall Gov. Howard Dean being any more public with his position, yet his support is accepted without this criticism.

The last point I would like to make is that a surprising number of gay people consider themselves to be Republicans. I have recently discovered that I have a lot more friends who are gay and Republican than I ever expected. The growing strength of the Log Cabin Republicans nationally also indicates that gay Republicans are starting to become more of an open political force.

The most interesting fact is that 40% of all gay voters voted Republican in the last election (*New York Times*, November 13, 1994). Those of us in this 40% may not be very outspoken, but we exist. I believe that most of the leaders in Vermont's gay community are beginning to recognize this and understand that they need to reach out to rather than exclude Republicans who are gay or supportive of gay issues. I view this as a very positive development that can only result in better understanding and acceptance of gay people and issues in Vermont. I hope it continues.

At the request of the author, "Kevin Anderson" is a pseudonym.

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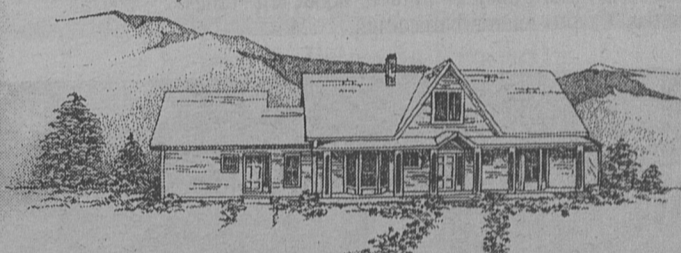
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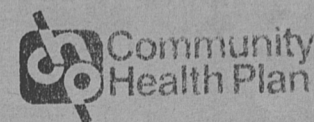


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