

Community Members Awarded by VCLGR

Bennett Law
OITM Staff

MONTPELIER -- The Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights made its first annual awards presentation at its Conference and Queer Town Meeting on October 28th, 1995. VCLGR Board Member Joseph Watson of East Middlebury cited a Letter to the Editor of this newspaper, decrying the failure of the Coalition to appropriately acknowledge the long service of Holly Perdue and Keith Goslant as Co-Liaisons to the State Legislature, as the final spark motivating the establishment of a VCLGR Volunteer of the Year Award.

A single award, however, would not have been sufficient to recognize the array of valued contributions made to our community. In his speech from the podium of the Queer Town Meeting, Watson stated, "In recent years it has been more and more clear that it would be nice to have a way to acknowledge individuals who have served our community. In reality, because so many have given so much of themselves there is no way to properly acknowledge or thank them. For years, indeed for decades, Vermonters have put massive amounts of individual energy and resources into the promotion of our civil rights. It seems to me that it would be impossible to properly thank those that have come before today. But we can start with today, the here and now. In an attempt to do that, we've come up with the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights Awards."


The VCLGR Volunteer of the Year Award is given to a member who, by giving of his or her time, energy, and talents, contributed to the programs and activities of the Coalition during the prior year. Beth Robinson of Ferrisburgh became the first recipient of this award, in recognition of the enormous contribution Beth made of her time and legal talent in researching our state's adoption laws in support of the Coalition's legislative effort in preserving the right to second-parent adoptions in Vermont.

The VCLGR Pride Award is given to individuals who, through acts of courage in the face of criticism, difficulty, or danger, embody the spirit of Gay Pride. Ed Flanagan of Burlington, Vermont's State Auditor, was recognized for his personal and professional courage in becoming the first statewide elected official in the country to come out as a gay man. Paula Baker of Rutland was recognized for her grace, composure, and steadfastness in taking an unflinching stance against censorship at the Rutland Free Library where she serves as Director, while enduring media coverage of her lesbianism. In the evening following the Conference, Baker was also recognized by the ACLU for the integrity she showed in her stance against censorship.

The VCLGR Leadership Award is given annually to an individual who, through his or her leadership, activism, and dedication, demonstrated a long-term commitment to advancing the civil rights, personal empowerment, and social acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Vermonters. Burlington lawyer David Curtis became the first honoree, in recognition of his longstanding advocacy and volunteerism on behalf of people with AIDS and the HIV-infected in Vermont.

Each honoree received a certificate and, through the kindness and generosity of innkeepers Richard Casson and Ken Eden, a complimentary stay at the Autumn Crest Inn in Williamstown.

The awards presentation was the emotional highlight of October's Conference, reaching a peak when the appreciative crowd rose to its feet to honor Paula Baker. Watson suggested that the huge success of this presentation not only reflects the pleasure the audience took in the recognition of such deserving recipients, but this acknowledgment also helped to illuminate the value that each of our personal contributions has to our community. ▼



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Members of the Queer Town

MONTPELIER -- Approximately 400 people descended upon Montpelier High School on October 28, 1995, for the third annual Conference and Queer Town Meeting sponsored by the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Although it was a busy day for all attendees, some took time out to speak with OITM. Here is what some members of the queer town had to say.

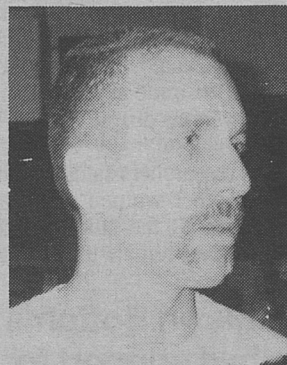


Dudley, Strafford, VCLGR Board Co-Chair

"I think (VCLGR) has grown a lot organizationally but we still have a lot of work to do in terms of having the general g/l/b/t community know who we are and what we do. I think they're still not sure what we do, other than lobbying stuff. And I don't think they think we're fun, and we are."

Christopher Wesolowski, Newfane, last year's VCLGR Board Chair

"It's been a difficult year on some levels due to our own growth as a Board, but also very successful because we met a lot of challenges head on, very effectively ... We are very proud of that ... You have to keep your eyes on the prize. What are we really doing? If you want to focus on the small stuff, the petty, the insignificant, fine. But then you lose your bigger vision."



Kirsten Isgro, Burlington, Co-Founder of the Vermont Bisexual Network

"I came out eight or nine years ago ... (when) there was no understanding or vocabulary to talk about what my personal experiences were. That's changing. Even in the keynote address today, there was lots of inclusiveness of bisexual issues ... The more we talk amongst ourselves, the more we understand each other and realize that we really have much more in common than we (have) differences."



Ed Flanagan, Burlington, State Auditor of Accounts

"I (attended the Conference) two years ago, but I was a little more anonymous ... (This year) it's much more exciting and satisfying. I feel more involved. It's just one of many by-products of the decision I made about coming out. I'm very happy about it, and it's great to be here ... I'm kind of a newcomer in terms of the political battle. There are a lot of people who've worked hard and long before I leaped in, and I'm honored that they would ask me to participate as directly as they have."



A Vermont Voice:

An interview with playwright Jan Donley

Chris Tebbetts
OITM Staff

PLAINFIELD/BURLINGTON -- "I wish there were more stories about lesbian life," says writer Jan Donley. Not one to merely complain, she prefers to do something about it. She is the author of the upcoming Green Candle Theatre Company's production, *A Closet Year*, as well as a number of short plays and two novels, all of which deal, in some way, with gay and lesbian experience.

Donley moved to Vermont in 1993, to teach writing and literature at Goddard College. Prior to that, she spent five years teaching college in Missouri, earned an MFA in Playwriting from Indiana University and an MA in Literature from the University of Tulsa, and did her undergraduate work at the University of Arizona. She is currently living in Burlington and buying a house with her partner Diane Felicio.

Donley has been writing since long before she came out thirteen years ago. It was facing her own lesbianism, however, that provided a much needed epiphany, in her life and in her work. After that, she said, "In my writing, the worlds I wanted to create became very clear to me."

Today, writing for her is a balance of responsibility to her peers and to her own creative expression. "I write about the world as I know and envision," she said. Making sure she is clear about speaking for herself and not other writers, she continued, "I feel an obligation to create worlds that make people feel good about being in the world, to come away feeling hope, that there's some usefulness in human nature." That approach can have its pitfalls, but for Donley, it does not mean glossing over reality or having to be sugary sweet. *A Closet Year*, for instance, contains allusions to an incestuous relationship. But, Donley said, "I don't want the violence to be the story. I want the growth and knowledge that comes from violence to be the story."

Donley doesn't think of herself as a lesbian writer so much as a writer, period. She does, however, consider writing to be a potent form of activism, and is currently teaching a course titled "Writing for Social Change." Using her craft to facilitate positive changes for lesbian, gay and bisexual people is for her an integral part of the process. "I consider my writing to be my strongest activism," she said. "I want to give stories to our people ... I don't just want *Go Fish* and *Clair of the Moon* ... I hope we can have more stories, so young people can see something that mimics what they want."

Donley can easily name a long list of writers she admires (Tennessee Williams, Athol Fugard, Ann Tyler, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett) but is hard pressed to name specific influences on her work. She likes quirky characters and absurdism; she is also drawn to ordinary situations where extraordinary truths are told. She is as inspired by fiction as she is by theatre, but she bemoans a dearth of successful female playwrights, particularly lesbian playwrights. "There are more stories about gay men ... I don't see as much good lesbian work out there." Lesbian stories do not seem to be "in" these days, they do not sell. Donley is doing her part to change that and hopes that *A Closet Year* is part of more to come.

As for future plans, Donley will spend the coming weeks in collaboration with Green Candle on her play. She will continue to teach at Goddard College, and she will settle into her new home. Beyond that, she is as optimistic, ambitious, and clear-sighted as her own writing, while she runs down a long list of aspirations. "I'd love to have some of my fiction published. I'd like to write a novel that made it. I want to keep writing interesting plays. I'd like to see something of mine on the screen. For now, I'd be satisfied with regular productions. I love writing children's stories; I'd like to get some of them out there." As a writer, it seems, Jan Donley is just getting started. ▼