

## VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS: Domestic Abuse and the G/L/B/T Community

Jeff Trumbower

**BURLINGTON** — At last October's VCLGR Conference and Queer Town Meeting in Montpelier, a group of about twelve lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men gathered to learn more about a little-discussed aspect of life in our community: same-sex domestic abuse. The session was led by Amy Branch of Monkton and Peter Brown of Montpelier, two members of our community who have experience working with perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse of all kinds. A Conference session on this issue was also held two years ago, and it is the hope of many that we are just at the beginning stages of greater visibility and openness about this problem here in Vermont.

Some of the participants at this year's meeting had personal experiences with same-sex violence or abuse, and almost all of us knew someone who had. We examined the reluctance among many in the g/l/b/t community to acknowledge that the problem exists because as we combat homophobia in this society around us, and as we take justifiable pride in the community we have built, we occasionally forget that as human beings we too can be prone to violence or the desire to control others. Several lesbians in the group recalled their feelings of shock and horror when they first encountered a woman who had been battered or otherwise abused by another woman. They had thought that such violence only belonged to the discarded realm of heterosexual patriarchy; to discover it in our own community was a painful realization. For many gay men in the group, there was a sense that admitting to being victimized might lead to a decrease in our sense of manhood, and we had to admit that gay men can be violent just like straight men.

The group discussed the problem of defining and recognizing abuse when it occurs. It is not always the larger or stronger partner who perpetrates the abuse, and the abuse is not always physical. Power and control are the keys: arbitrary rule-setting, limiting whom the other person sees, controlling time, "crazy-making" emotional abuse, threatening violence — all of these are tools that can be used by one partner to control and abuse the other. Fighting back against these methods sometimes brings a counterclaim of "mutual abuse," but the group consensus was that there is almost always an identifiable partner who consistently has more power and control in any domestic abuse situation.

We discussed the need for greater awareness of this problem in our community and the need for greater resources in Vermont to help both perpetrators and victims. Lesbian victims may seek refuge at shelters for battered women, but we discussed the reality that they might encounter homophobia in such an environment, and such

places might not be a safe enough haven since they are designed to keep out male abusers. We knew of virtually no support services targeted for male victims of same-sex abuse in Vermont, neither are there specific programs aimed at changing the behavior of same-sex abusers.

Lastly, our group discussed what might be done. First, we recognized that police, judges, and social workers need greater training in this area so that they might recognize same-sex domestic abuse when they encounter it. A number of people in Vermont are already working to provide greater awareness and resources on this front. The Chittenden County Domestic Violence Task Force has formed a sub-committee to study the issue of same-sex domestic violence, thanks to the initiatives of Chittenden County Assistant Judge Althea Kroger, Annabelle Lowrey of Women Helping Battered Women, and Doris Clayton-Viens, the victims' advocate for the state's attorney. Peter Brown and I have attended several of their meetings.

Our g/l/b/t community has responsibilities too: we could compile a list of "safe spaces," meaning people with a spare bedroom who could be available to take in a victim temporarily on short notice. We can be willing to attend and conduct training sessions in violence prevention and education, organizing support groups for victims and behavior modification groups for perpetrators. Many cities already have these types of resources in place in the gay and lesbian community.

At the very least, we should all get in the habit of confronting perpetrators when we hear about abuse. We must all reinforce the notion that domestic abuse cannot be tolerated in any form, whether it is within an opposite-sex or same-sex relationship. If we know of someone being victimized, we must encourage that person to break the cycle and seek help.

*Jeff Trumbower teaches at St. Michael's College and is a volunteer with Vermont CARES and Outright Vermont. If you have other ideas about how our community might respond, you may contact him at (802) 654-2373.*

*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](mailto:OutVermont@aol.com)*

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