

Activists Creating Change

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The rural roundtable that I attended was disappointing. Vermont is far ahead of other rural states in statewide organizing and on legislative issues. We already have a statewide newspaper, statewide participation and representation in VCLGR, and an annual conference. We already have the civil rights that people are fighting for in other places.

Dudley: Other rural areas are trying to organize within the closet, without trying to get people to come out of the closet.

Aranoff: It's an accepted rural value to keep one's private life private. (Organizing inside the closet) is presented as being not about homophobia, but about discretion. Well, if they're being more discrete than straight people, it reflects homophobia, perhaps the acting out of internalized homophobia.

The main cultural tension between Vermont and Detroit centered on alternate mindsets: that we are really like everyone else vs. that we are fundamentally different, but should still have the same rights. This is a clear difference in perspective.

Dudley: We say we want the right to marry because we're just like everybody else, but this only sets up a good queer/bad queer situation. The "good queers" will be the married ones, aping the heterosexual norm. The "bad queers" won't conform (yet again).

We, because of our gender expressions, are not mainstream. I went to workshops on sexuality. Sexuality is part of our movement; we have to acknowledge that. We challenge the foundations of our society, that there are two genders, and two gender roles. Our existence challenges this, for our self expression takes other forms. People can change genders. We are not like everyone else; we do transgressive things.

The existence of gays and lesbians, and the increasing recognition of our existence, is threatening to the Right. We don't do enough for bi, gay, lesbian, and questioning youth because we are afraid of the "child molester" tag attached to us by the Right. We need to insist on places for l/g/b/q youth to have their questions addressed.

Aranoff: In terms of sexism, our existence is threatening. We don't play the normal gender roles. A lot of resistance to gay marriage comes from the idea of the sanctity of marriage as the last bastion of heterosexuality. The resistance is tied to a fear of sex and sex roles.

Dudley: A lot of people don't feel right in these constrictions. We advocate people experiencing all aspects of themselves.

Aranoff: VCLGR is less sex positive than other lesbian and gay organizations, and our community is more sexually repressed than in other states. Talk about us being sexual beings was more casually interwoven in other discussions at the Conference than I have experienced in Vermont. There was more talk about sexual liberation.

Another thing I got out of the conference — the horrendous pieces of legislation that people in other states have had to fight was eye-opening to me. Kentucky had 13 pieces of anti-gay legislation in one year. One of them would have made it justifiable homicide if you "reasonably" believed that the victim was HIV+ and if you "reasonably" believed that they could transmit the disease to you. This was tantamount to allowing people to kill people they suspected of being gay. A Montana bill would have required that people convicted of sodomy, defined to include all "unnatural" sex acts (this means lesbians, too), register for life as sex offenders with the state.

I came back inspired. I think Dudley came back overwhelmed.

Dudley: I was overwhelmed. It's enough having to deal with g/l issues, but considering all the related issues, too, can be overwhelming. Even with all of the time and energy and resources that our community has, it doesn't compare to the mega-jackpot that the Right can draw from. ▼

Robert's Rules of Order: A conversation with Robert Toms



(Photo: Chris Tebbets)

135 Pearl's, Robert Toms

Chris Tebbets
OITM Staff

BURLINGTON — Robert Toms has made many changes at 135 Pearl, the Burlington club he has owned since the Spring of 1995 and managed for the past two years. It is no longer a gay bar, it is a "gender and orientation neutral bar." It has once again started serving food. It is now the site of a yearly "Unity Day" celebration in conjunction with Gay Pride. It features 18+ nights, with greater access to the under 21 crowd, and a wider variety of deejays and dance music. It has become a space for visual and performing artists, featuring photography and paintings on the walls; and cabaret acts and plays in the downstairs space. "We're trying to be something for everybody — desperately," he says. His choices have brought praise from some, criticism from others, and a certain amount of controversy.

The following is excerpted from a conversation with Toms about his motivations, his role in the community, and the reactions he has received.

OITM: What was behind your decision to go "orientation neutral"?

Toms: We're adapting to Burlington ... In (other area clubs like) Club Toast (and) Metronome, in their advertising, it says "(We) are open-minded, we are accepting to all. Whatever your thing is — if you're gay, straight, transsexual — you're welcome here and this is a safe space." ... We decided there's no reason ... we couldn't market our establishment (similarly). Just because we're a gay establishment, we have to be underground and hidden? I looked at this like "No, I'm very proud of who I am. I'm a gay individual, I'm very proud of the people I work for, and I'm very proud of the people who come to my establishment. There's no reason we can't advertise in the big papers ... and on the radio." ... Ultimately, we still possess a gay identity, because that's where we started from ... It's going to be a melting pot, no matter what. And I'm sorry but the establishment itself is not going to survive with just a gay clientele.

OITM: So is it a gay bar or not?

Toms: That's a tough situation. I will honestly say that we are an establishment that caters to everyone. We are predominantly a gay establishment. The majority of people who walk in that door are gay. The people who are going to feel most comfortable coming to our establishment are gay. The fact that people who are not gay come into our establishment is wonderful because they're secure enough to go into an establishment where they may be the minority. I would say that 85 to 90% of our establishment is always going to be gay. And that's how it is.

OITM: How do you feel about negative reactions from the community?

Toms: I think it's upsetting. (Those) who do complain are very upset about what we're doing ... I hear them. I honestly hear them. No matter what you're going to do, somebody's going to want something else ... What it comes down to is that this bar isn't the same bar it was ten year

ago. Times are changing and we're changing with the times.

I'm constantly trying new things and new nights and new ideas because I hear someone complain. And continuously I'm exhausted by it because I put all my heart and soul into it, we advertise the hell out of it, and no one shows up. That's exhausting. What can you do when nobody shows up? The bills still have to be paid. This is not a community center, we are not funded by the government. We're funded by whatever comes in these doors, and the overhead is astronomical.

OITM: People might accuse you of selling out the g/l/b/t community. What do you think of that?

Toms: I think ultimately that is personal. What happens in a small community is that people create images. They make their own decisions without finding out who the person is. What's really interesting is that the people who do know me in this community know who I am and know that I have never sold out to anyone.

OITM: What about Unity Day? Can you say something about that?

Toms: The reason we decided to name our celebration of gay pride "Unity Day" was not to forget about gay pride or to separate ourselves from the whole gay pride celebration ... What happened was the previous year, I wished to work with the gay pride committee. I really bent over backwards to do what I (could) to connect the bar and the gay pride committee. Through really terrible business relations, it did not happen. We worked together the first year and it was ... mentally and physically exhausting. I tried many attempts to create a rapport with the committee and for us to collaborate as a community and celebrate this together. They were elitist in a sense, and they wished to take control. They wanted the whole celebration, they wanted to say, "No, this is how it is, this is how we want it, and it's our agenda." I was extremely upset by that.

So we decided here at the club that we would give the community exactly what they want and give them an alternative in a sense ... I wanted to create an atmosphere where everybody was welcome: allies, straight, gay, whatever it was ... We all came together and united because I feel that's what the end product of gay pride is — we're all striving for equality, we're all striving for unity ... It was titled 'Unity: A Pride in One's Self.' It was being proud of who you are and united everybody to celebrate. That's what our focus was.

OITM: But what about a day of celebrating uniqueness?

Toms: So what happens to all the allies who march in the parade?

OITM: They go to a gay pride party instead of a unity party.


Toms: They go to a gay pride party and they go to a unity party, and it's all the same ... What are you looking for with gay pride? ... What is the ultimate goal of the gay individual? What do you want to feel? Do you want to feel respect? Do you want to feel equality? Do you want to feel that you have the right to be whoever you want to be? Do you want to have a situation one day where it's not a gay pride thing, but it's a people thing? It's deeper ... I don't choose to segregate and to celebrate just one thing. We are celebrating our ultimate goal. That's what I was doing, for unity.

OITM: Will it be "Unity Day" again in 1996?

Toms: Yes it will.

OITM: Your tone tends toward defensiveness sometimes in this conversation. How do you feel about that?

Toms: I guess I grow defensive because it's so personal. Sometimes I'm defensive because I think in any situation, anybody who feels so strongly and is so committed to any movement or to any project and it's in their heart and soul, they're going to grow defensive because they care so much. If I become defensive it's because I care. ▼



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