

Out in the Mountains

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VERMONT'S FORUM FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES

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FREE

Vermont Teddy Bear Targets Gay Market (or, "The Tale of the Two-Timing Teddy")



He wants something special...

It's Valentine's Day.

Send the Bear-Gram™
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Over 150 choices for all of life's events.

SHELBURNE - In a bold departure from previous marketing strategies, the Shelburne-based Vermont Teddy Bear Company recently placed a homoerotic advertisement in a number of gay publications across the country. This move comes just months after the company abandoned their advertising campaign on the ultra-conservative and often anti-gay Rush Limbaugh radio show.

The new ad, which was developed in-house here in Vermont, appeared in local publications in six major U.S. cities including Boston, New York, Washington, and San Francisco. Vermont Teddy Bear spokesperson Elizabeth Walikis claimed that the one-time ads, intended to coincide with Valentine's Day, were experimental in nature, and that they followed the company's policy of "always testing new markets."

Vermont Teddy Bear placed the ads through the Rivendell Agency, a national marketing corporation which provides its services to many of the larger, more established g/l/b/t publications around the country.

According to sources at Rivendell, the advertisement which appeared prior to Valentine's Day was something of a compromise between the two companies. Vermont Teddy Bear's original copy was "over the top" and "more sexual than it needed to be," the sources reported, adding that "we advised them to tone it down."

Cara Silverstein, a marketing representative at Rivendell, was interested to learn of Vermont Teddy Bear's prior advertising with Rush Limbaugh. She stated that Rivendell "usually makes sure that clients are gay-positive and gay-friendly" before assisting them with placement in the gay and lesbian press.

David Bergman, Advertising Director for the magazine *Frontiers*, which ran the final version of the ad in its city-based publications, also expressed surprise and concern over Vermont Teddy Bear's previous association with the Rush Limbaugh show. He had reservations about future ad placement, noting that his publication was very careful about such market practices. *Frontiers* had been one of several gay/lesbian publications to boycott the Coors Brewing Company years ago for its anti-gay policies.

Walikis felt that Vermont Teddy Bear certainly qualified as a "gay-friendly, gay-positive" corporation, however, and commented on the "really open" and "non-judgmental" atmosphere present within the Shelburne factory. Though she did not at first know whether sexual orientation was included in the company's non-discrimination policy, she later reported that it had indeed been put in place. At present, Vermont Teddy Bear does not have any written policies recognizing domestic partnerships of same-sex couples.

Walikis expressed surprise on hearing that a number of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people throughout Vermont had instituted something of an underground boycott of the company due to its prior advertising on the Rush Limbaugh show. "I certainly was not aware of that," she said, though she did mention that the company had received both supportive and critical responses to the ads, with the negative calls outnumbering the positive.

Even so, the company's decision to pull the Limbaugh radio spot was "totally numbers-based," Walikis claimed, adding that "we were not bringing in the sales" needed to continue running the ad. When asked why the company then turned to the gay men's market, she had no specific answer. After a number of messages were left over the course of a week, the company's Marketing Director refused to return OITM's calls on the matter.

According to Rivendell, business from the advertisement "met the expectations" of Vermont Teddy Bear, though neither Rivendell nor Walikis would cite any specific figures. Walikis said that final results of the success of the ad would not be available until May 15th, and would be made available at that time. ▼

Governor's Suicide Prevention Task Force Addresses Sexual Orientation

by Paul Olsen

MONTPELIER -- In response to a number of suicides by young people in Vermont, Governor Howard Dean recently established a Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force. "The Governor wanted to refocus attention on how we can prevent teen suicide," said Governor Dean's spokeswoman Stephanie Carter.

The Task Force is co-chaired by Department of Health Commissioner Dr. Jan Carney and Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Commissioner Rodney Copeland. Among the Task Force members is a representative from Outright Vermont, Vermont's only gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth support service organization.

Recent studies have documented a sharp rise in youth suicide nationwide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that, between 1980 and 1992, suicide rates rose 28 percent among Americans age 15 to 19 and 120 percent among those aged 10 to 14. Since 1990, at least 42 Vermont teens are known to have committed suicide.

Though no successful studies have been undertaken to track attempted suicides in Vermont, the state of Oregon found that 31 non-fatal suicide attempts were reported for every completed suicide.

Many risk factors (including substance abuse, stress, and mental illness) are

associated with suicide plans. Even so, suicide and attempted suicide rates among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and sexually questioning adolescents are higher than those of their heterosexual peers. According to a 1983 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, gay, lesbian and bisexual young people run three times the risk of suicidal behavior and comprise 30 percent of completed teen suicides. The study also found suicide to be the leading cause of death among g/l/b youth.

Vermont does not appear to be immune from these trends. Copeland indicated that he had "heard anecdotally that they (g/l/b youth) are at greater risk."

Karin Eade, Outright Vermont's Executive Director, concurred with Copeland. "A high majority of the young people we see talk about suicide," she said. "Rural communities have higher rates of suicide for g/l/b youth...isolation is compounded in a rural community like Vermont."

The Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force members recently began their work. Meetings to date have focused on reviewing a 1988 Youth Suicide Prevention Report, educating themselves about youth suicide, defining the mission of the new Task Force, and planning how best to proceed. According to Co-chair Rodney Copeland, the mission of the Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force is to

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Sweets for the Statehouse: Valentine Visibility Day

by Joseph Watson



Governor Howard Dean (right) awaits a piece of Liaison Keith Goslant's birthday cake at the State House on g/l/b/t Visibility Day.

MONTPELIER -- On Valentine's Day, February 14, the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VCLGR) hosted "Visibility Day" at the Vermont Statehouse in Montpelier.

Organizers of the event had two main goals. First, they wanted to educate Senators and Representatives on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues and to influence their votes on legislation already before them. Second, they wanted to bring legislators together with g/l/b/t individuals from their constituency.

Using the ol' "You get more flies with sugar than vinegar" approach, VCLGR members spent the day at a table in the busy lobby of the Statehouse offering coffee, bagels, and Hershey's Kisses to passersby. They also distributed position papers, pamphlets, and lapel stickers along with the goodies. By

mid-day, the "Love Makes a Family" stickers appeared throughout the crowd, and brought to many people's minds the adoption reform legislation currently under consideration.

VCLGR had sent invitations to its entire mailing list. The Co-Liaisons to the government, Susan Aranoff (now retired) and Keith Goslant, made introductions, pulling legislators aside to meet constituents who had come from all corners of the state to spend Valentine's Day in Montpelier.

The highlight of the day came when Governor Howard Dean appeared to present a birthday cake to Keith Goslant. Together, they served cake to those assembled and chatted with the VCLGR volunteers. ▼