

Out in the Mountains

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Weekday at Bernie's: The OITM Interview with Rep. Bernie Sanders

by Paul Olsen

BURLINGTON -- Fifteen years ago, Bernie Sanders changed Burlington's political landscape by narrowly defeating incumbent Democratic Mayor Gordon Paquette. Since 1990, he has served as Vermont's lone State Representative, and the only Independent, in the U.S. House of Representatives. Sanders, 54, currently serves on the House Banking and Financial Services Committee, the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, and as Chair of the Progressive Caucus of the U.S. Congress.

According to Sanders, the 34-member Progressive Caucus is organized around "the principles of social and economic justice, a non-discriminating society, and national priorities which represent the interests of all people, not just the wealthy and powerful." Its purpose Sanders declares, is "to present thoughtful, practical solutions to the economic and social problems facing America." Major agenda items for Sanders include progressive tax reform, national health care, military spending cuts, environmental health and safety, a national energy policy, support for family farms, the rights of workers, job creation, increasing the minimum wage, and women's rights.

As Burlington's Mayor, Sanders issued a proclamation recognizing Gay Pride Day in spite of the City Council's opposition. Since serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, he has co-sponsored two federal bills (the Employment Nondiscrimination Act and the Civil Rights Amendments Act) that, if passed, would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation nationwide. Sanders has consistently received 100% positive ratings from two national gay rights groups: the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF).

Representative Sanders recently met with *Out in the Mountains* to discuss gay rights, the current political climate, and his own upcoming re-election campaign against State Senator Susan Sweetser (R-Chittenden).

OITM: How do the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Vermonters fit with the progressive movement in America?

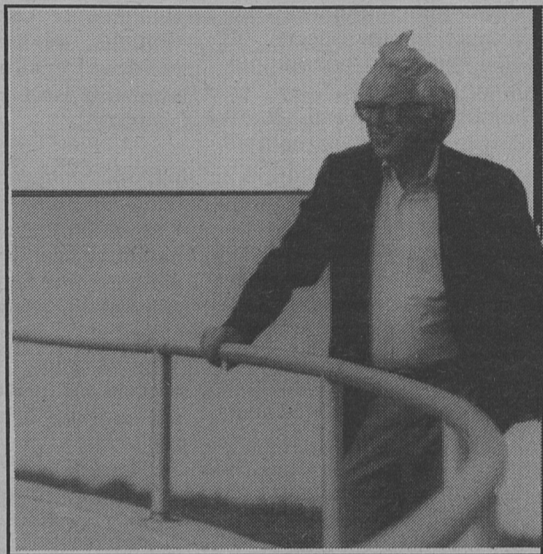
Sanders: I think the progressive movement believes in a nondiscriminatory society...that people are judged by their character, their ability to do their jobs, and not by their race, their color, their political orientation, or their sexual orientation. People have the right to do what they can do in their lives without being discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

I'm very proud of the fact that the record will show that we have a 100% voting record on these issues. Progressives who have been active in the women's movement, active in the civil rights movement, active in the gay rights movement... I think you'll find them often in the forefront of this struggle, prepared to come out earlier and more forcefully than many others.

OITM: What are your thoughts on the prospects of passage of national civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation?

Sanders: You know as well as I do what's going on in the Congress right now. The standard of living of the middle class is in decline and working people are working longer hours for low wages. The people who control the country are trying to divide America up in many different ways. They have made the poor a major scapegoat, so they are blaming a lot of the economic problems that the middle class is having on the poor which is absolutely untrue.

They also need other types of scapegoats in terms of people who have utilized Affirmative Action. Gay people in particular are being singled out as the



Independent U.S. Representative Bernie Sanders.

cause of many of the social problems that we face in this country. So I think so long as we have people like (House Speaker) Gingrich, Pat Buchanan, Dick Arney, and folks like that leading the United States Congress, I am not optimistic that we're going to have policies developed that will support equal rights for all members of society.

The gay community is being used as a whipping boy, just as the poor people are, and just as blacks will be in a more subtle way. The gay community is right on the hit list of the Christian Coalition.

OITM: In spite of the military's new "don't ask, don't tell" policy, the number of discharged gay members of the armed services increased 21% in 1995. What are your thoughts on the new policy?

Sanders: I think Clinton has wavered a great deal. My own view is that throughout the history of this country no one can deny that gay men and women have fought in our wars and have given their lives. They have every right, if they choose, to participate fully in the military, and we are opposed to discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military.

OITM: Congress passed, and President Clinton recently signed (as part of a larger Defense bill) into law Representative Bob Dornan's (R-California) proposal to discharge members of the armed services who are HIV-positive. What is your position on this policy and what, if any, are the prospects for reversing it?

Sanders: I am strongly opposed to that policy. Dornan is one of the leading homophobes in the Congress. It is an incredibly vicious policy because it discriminates and hurts people who are already suffering.

We all know enough about AIDS now to know how it is passed and how it is not passed. We have one of the leading basketball players in the N.B.A., who is HIV-positive, now doing an extraordinarily good job for the Los Angeles Lakers.

Dornan is one of the leaders of the Right Wing's efforts to use the gay community as whipping boys. I don't think you're going to reverse that (discharge policy) within the current complexion of the Congress. It is really rather astounding and quite frightening that a person like Bob Dornan can become the Chairman of an important subcommittee. So long as the Republicans control the Congress, and so long as the Christian Coalition continues to have the kind of influence it does, we cannot expect a cessation in the anti-gay attacks.

OITM: Increased funding for AIDS services in Vermont under the Ryan White CARE Act is currently delayed while House and Senate conferees try to resolve differences regarding HIV testing of

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Legislature Unexpectedly Confronts Gay Marriage

MONTPELIER — A preliminary skirmish shows that the politically charged issue of whether to legalize same-sex marriages will probably be hotly contested in the Vermont State house.

The issue unexpectedly arose on the Senate floor as lawmakers prepared to debate what was presumed to be a rather innocuous bill. The legislation would have dropped the requirement that people seeking a marriage license had to obtain it through the town clerk in the community where they live. It would have allowed any town clerk in the state to issue a license to anyone, regardless of the applicant's hometown.

But Sen. Stephen Webster, R-Orange, noticed that the proposed bill would have deleted from state statutes anyone reference to "bride and groom." He argued that such a change would open Vermont to a court case claiming the state sanctioned gay marriages, which he opposes.

The bill had already passed the House without anyone — lobbyists or lawmakers — catching the significance of the wording. Sponsors said they had not intended to make gay marriages legal. It turned out that the Legislative Council had drafted the bill under a new policy that requires legislative staff to use gender-neutral language wherever possible.

The Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights had not laid the groundwork and was not prepared to make the case for gay marriages. But, fearing that either defeat of the bill or a vote to restore the phrase "bride and groom" would send the message that the Vermont Legislature opposed gay marriages, VCLGR took up the cause.

What VCLGR lobbyists succeeded in doing was getting the bill sent back to committee for more testimony. And, faced with the potentially huge ramifications that faced them, members of the Government Operations Committee decided to table the bill for this session.

What is not clear is how well the issue would fare on its own merits. The legislature has in the recently passed Adoption Reform Bill, already has approved opening adoption to lesbians and gays. Whether the coalition of Republicans and Democrats who came together on that issue would stick together on the even more controversial issue of gay marriages is an open question. ▼

The Healing Arts: Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company Comes to Vermont



Photo by Staci Visco

UVM Campus Minister Roddy Cleary shares a moment of humorous insight with gay dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones.

by Paul Olsen

Openly gay dancer, director and choreographer Bill T. Jones recently brought his world-renowned dance company to perform in Burlington. Jones, 44, based his provocative new dance, "Still/Here," on interviews with more than 200 people facing life-threatening illnesses. Jones himself disclosed that he is HIV-positive in 1992.

In addition to his dance company's performance, Jones's visit included participation in a community forum on living with mortality in America. Subtitled "How Will We Live Well While Dying?," the two-hour forum (sponsored by Fletcher Allen Health Care, the Flynn Theater, and the Vermont Ethics Network) included medical ethicist Daniel Callahan and a three-member community panel. Roddy O'Neal Cleary, Campus Minister at the University of Vermont, moderated the discussion.

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