

## VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS:

### Who Will Fight For Me?

by Roberta Patterson

*Author's Note: My partner and I were recently forced to leave the Army because we were being blackmailed and could no longer afford to pay. If it were not for some excellent legal advice from the Servicemembers' Legal Defense Network, I would not be free to write an article such as this one. Since our discharge, I have been shocked to find that some people believe that homosexuals are now protected under the "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy. Because of this, the plight of our soldiers is quickly being forgotten.*

**HINESBURG** -- Memorial Day may best be known for backyard cookouts, town parades, the playing of taps by a Boy Scout at the local war memorial, and moments of silence to remember those who paid the ultimate price for freedom. For many veterans, it is a day of pride in knowing that when their country counted on them, they were able to do things they never dreamed they had the strength to do, mixed with heart-breaking grief over horrors they never thought any human could do.

Though gay men and lesbians have served and died right beside their comrades for as long as there has been a military, Memorial Day can be an alienating holiday for many homosexual veterans. The healing experience of sharing pride and grief with fellow veterans is often replaced with the loneliness of being outcast from the very group of people those same veterans swore to die protecting.

When a homosexual enlists in the Armed Services under the current "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, he or she takes an oath of celibacy and silence. An individual is allowed to have a homosexual orientation, but if he or she acts on that orientation, then he or she can be thrown into prison.

If the individual talks about it, then he or she can be thrown out of the military. If someone else presents evidence of the individual's homosexuality, it is treated as though there had been a personal confession.

Though the Constitution guarantees Americans a citizen Army, gay citizens, for all practical purposes, may not serve in that army. Though the Constitution guarantees the right to free speech and freedom of association, gay men and lesbians (and bisexuals who have had even one homosexual experience) do not have these rights.

So why serve? Why not leave the fighting to heterosexual Americans, if that's what they want?

When I was a soldier, I struggled with this daily, and will try to express years of soul-searching in as few words as possible.

If we are not part of the military, why should the military care about defending our rights? By excluding a section of the population from military service, the government ensures that the excluded group will not gain power. That is, of course, why it took so long for blacks to gain acceptance into the military.

Think back to elementary school, when you learned about the writing of the Constitution and the incorporation of checks and balances into the operation of our government. What was the purpose of a citizen Army? It was to protect the people of the United States from the government. It could then be interpreted that any group excluded from military service — whether that group be blacks, women, or gays — is not considered part of the people of the United States.

This Memorial Day, I suggest we all take a moment to honor all who fought for America, and then ask ourselves, "Next time, who will fight for me?" ▼

## Letters to the Editor

Dear *OITM*:

I'm writing with some thoughts that occurred to me while attending the 10th Annual Vermont CARES dinner in Burlington.

I listened to the speakers recounting the organization's development and difficult first years. Without the personal commitment and selfless expenditure of energy by a small group of people, Vermont CARES would probably not wear the face it does today. I want to again join the chorus of people who expressed their deeply-felt thanks to all those who have been involved with Vermont CARES. I would also like to offer a "preface" to the chapters of history presented at the 10th Annual Dinner.

In 1983, I joined a gay men's support group. A man (I'll call him "Dan") was also a member of that group. Dan began speaking more often about fatigue, and then developed red spots on his legs. Shortly after these complaints began, Dan was diagnosed with AIDS, the second person to be diagnosed in the state. There was no Vermont CARES, no Respite House, no aerosolized pentamidine, no AZT — just injections of morphine. Dan died at his parents' home with family and friends.

David Ryan was also a member of that support group. He now lives in Boston. Months before

Dan's death, David decided that the state needed to address the issue of AIDS in a plan-ful way. He began discussions with Barry Whitworth at the Vermont Department of Health. David was pleasantly surprised at the supportive stance taken by the Department of Health.

In the spring of 1985, David (and others, including Howdy Russell and Phillip Roberts) were instrumental in planning the first public forum in Vermont to discuss AIDS. The Vermont Department of Health, the University of Vermont (through Dr. Albertini), and the Vermont affiliate of the American Red Cross were all represented at the forum. The keynote speaker was Larry Kessler from AIDS Action of Boston. Dan had been asked to speak at the forum, but he did not survive until then.

I believe that David's early connection with the Vermont Department of Health helped the state understand that it needed to address the issue of AIDS here. I also recall that shortly after the forum, the state budgeted a small amount of money for the purpose of AIDS education. I believe that some of this money was used to fund the new organization, Vermont CARES.

Thank you, David.

-- Jim Morgan  
Colchester, Vermont

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