

Rutland Region Gets Organized

by Becky Eno and Bridget Martin

RUTLAND -- After two years of inactivity, the Rutland area gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community is getting its act together. Vermont CARES seeded the concept of local networking via the Men's Health Project (MHP) and a series of monthly potluck dinners at the United Methodist Church in Rutland. MHP also hosted a dance for the area in mid-February. From there, Mike B., a Rutland resident, and Ric Kasini-Kadour of MHP jointly planned, advertised, and facilitated a meeting for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in the area who were interested in building a stronger community network and information exchange. Seventeen people attended the March 25 meeting at the Rutland Free Library.

Ric led the group through a process of assessing the community in terms of resources and gay-friendly places and people. The picture that was collectively painted was not as dismal as most people thought it would be. The group identified 28 gay-friendly churches, businesses, and support groups in the region.

Next, participants created a vision of what they would like to see happen in the Rutland g/l/b/t community. Mike B. had already begun compiling a directory of gay-friendly professionals and businesses in the area. Some folks were interested in seeing more coverage in *Out in the Mountains*. Many people expressed a desire for more social activities, such as coffeehouses, dances, bars, and a dating service. One man presented a draft of a survey he had designed to address the diversity within the g/l/b/t community by creating smaller networks based on common interests, such as playing softball, music, chess, hiking, getting together for dinner, etc. The group also discussed

the need for increased visibility, though some people feared that this might reduce their sense of safety.

The first planning meeting yielded four concrete results: People started gathering at the Coffee Exchange on Merchant's Row every Wednesday evening; reporter Kevin O'Connor published an article about the local g/l/b/t experience in the *Rutland Herald*; there was a significant increase in the numbers attending the next First Saturday Out potluck dinner; and a second community planning meeting was scheduled.

Sixteen people attended the second meeting on April 15. About one third of the faces were different from those at the first meeting. The Coffee Exchange gatherings appeared to be building momentum, with growing numbers of both "regulars" and "one-timers." A concern was raised about the need for a separate phone line and computer hardware for the directory project.

The group also expressed a need to have a name. At the next meeting on May 14, the group chose to call itself "Proud in Rutland County," or PIRCy for short.

Upcoming events include the "Great Gay Orientation" at the Rutland Free Library on May 28th (7 p.m.), during which other statewide community resources will share information about themselves, and another community planning meeting on June 1st at the United Methodist Church. The group will also be sponsoring an open picnic at Lake St. Catherine State Park on Sunday, June 23, from 2:00 on.

Slowly but surely, the Rutland group is weaning itself from the nurturing influence of the Men's Health Project and becoming an independent and vital part of the Rutland community. ▼

Marriage Video In Production

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force has launched an ambitious effort to produce a short video which will demonstrate the real impact that restrictions on our freedom to marry have on members of our communities. The Task Force plans to use the video as part of a public education campaign during the coming months.

Video Co-Producer Joseph Watson explains, "Many people don't even realize that gay men and lesbian women cannot enter into legally-recognized same-gender marriages, and most people have not given much thought to the dozens of legal, economic, and social benefits reserved exclusively for legally married couples."

The video will incorporate on-camera interviews with various Vermonters as well as still photographs of same-gender commitment ceremonies and gay or lesbian couples with their children or other family members. The Task Force hopes to break down stereotypes by accurately portraying the gay and lesbian community as actively responsible citizens and family members.

"Our goal is to be inclusive and representative," explains Co-Producer Ellen Hill. "We would like to include younger and older couples; transplants from the flatlands as well as third-generation Vermonters; individuals representing a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds; and folks from all walks of life."

If you know of an individual or couple who would be appropriate subjects in this video, or if you would be willing to provide the Task Force with still photographs to use in this project, you should contact one of the producers named above or Beth Robinson at 802.388.6356 during the day. ▼

"Youth Aware" Looks at Gender and Sexuality Issues

MIDDLEBURY -- A group called "Youth Aware" has held three planning sessions in Addison County to help support young people who are dealing with issues of gender and sexuality identity.

The meetings, initiated through the Counseling Service of Addison County and Outright Vermont, have drawn nearly fifty community members together to address the issue. Through a series of video presentations and open discussions, the group has worked to educate itself on a number of topics, including HIV/AIDS education in high schools and issues affecting transgendered youth.

Specific projects have included placing pink triangle "Safe Space" cards around the county, contacting local churches for video presentations, and working with an Ally group of students currently meeting at Mount Abraham Union High School in Bristol. The group also hopes to increase its own political presence by forming alliances with other statewide organizations and undertaking community education programs.

"Youth Aware" is also preparing itself for opposition, particularly as plans to introduce homosexuality into discussions of teen suicide have already met with resistance in the Vergennes school system.

The next meeting of the group will be on Thursday, May 30th, from 7-9 in the public meeting room of the Ilsley Library in Middlebury. For more information, call Hugh at 388-6503. ▼

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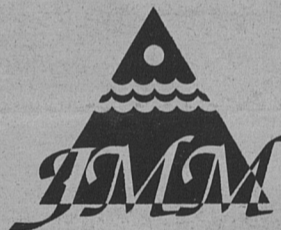
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