

## Town Meeting

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Vermont's g/l/b/t/q youth. Executive Director Karin Eade accepted the award, and thanked the many staff members, volunteers, and Board members who had helped Outright Vermont in its important mission to improve the climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth.

Judith Beckett received the Volunteer of the Year Award for her hard work as Volunteer Coordinator of the Coalition. VCLGR's Leadership Award went to Holly Perdue, who for many years served as Co-Liaison to the Government with Keith Goslant.

Discussion during the Town Meeting itself brought a number of suggestions to the forefront, including wishes to offer more programming around substance abuse, socioeconomic class, elder community members, and oppression. Facilitator Susan Aranoff reflected on the diversity of comments by describing Vermont as "a state where we are very political, but our politics are really broad."

During the afternoon session, the Coalition welcomed a number of new Board members into its ranks, including Virginia Renfrew of Warren, who was also elected as Co-Liaison to the Government. Also elected or re-elected to the Board were Dean Martin of East Calais, Jennifer Taub of Burlington, Shelley Smith of Plainfield, John McDonald of Chelsea, Karen Cayre of Hardwick, and Judith Lashof of Sudbury.

Lashof will also serve as the female Co-Chair of VCLGR, with a male Co-Chair to be selected in the coming months. It is expected that Duane Gajewski will be elected as Treasurer at the first meeting of the Board. VCLGR also named its first Diversity Chair, Paj Wadley-Bailey.

Despite continuing a decline in attendance over the years, the annual "town meeting" drew strong

positive response from southern Vermont and resulted in a 400% increase in participation from the Brattleboro area. Event organizers had hoped for such numbers, which suggest that they were effective in their outreach efforts to that part of the state.

Women out-numbered men nearly 2 to 1 at the conference, a ratio which has proven to be typical of the conferences since their inception. When asked about the statistic, new Co-Chair Judith Lashof commented, "I think that the lesbian community as a whole is more oriented toward political activism and political involvement."

This may explain why the Coalition was unable to fill the men's vacancies on its Board of Directors. VCLGR also currently lacks a male Co-Chair. Lashof has fielded a number of new nominations, however, and spoke with several interested people at the Conference. She expects the Board will elect additional representatives at its first official meeting.

When asked about her plans for leading VCLGR into 1997, Lashof replied that she hoped "to achieve a better balance between organizational development and internal issues and external issues like community organizing and community education, public policy, etc." She also set a challenge to double the membership of the Coalition over the coming years, and to provide greater outreach to the smaller communities within the state in order to "give people a chance to connect better with the Coalition and the Coalition Board."

In the meantime, anyone interested in serving on the VCLGR Board or in volunteering on one of its committees is encouraged to call Judith at 623-6131 or to write VCLGR at PO Box 1125, Montpelier VT 05601-1125. ▼

## Hawaii Decision

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sound basis for claiming a compelling, or even a substantial, state interest in withholding the marriage statute from same-sex couples; a mere feeling of distaste or even revulsion at what someone else is or does, simply because it offends majority values without causing concrete harm, cannot justify inherently discriminatory legislation against members of a constitutionally protected class — as the history of constitutional rulings against racially discriminatory legislation makes clear."

In its language, the ruling echoes another significant decision passed down by the United States Supreme Court earlier this year, when Colorado's anti-gay initiatives were deemed unconstitutional. There too, the Courts found that simply because one group of people didn't like another group of people, the first group could not deny the second equal protection under the law.

Chang found that those seeking to bar gay and lesbian couples from marriage had not provided compelling evidence in the case. He wrote, "Defendant has failed to present sufficient credible evidence which demonstrates that the public interest in the well-being of children and families, or the optimal development of children would be adversely affected by same sex marriage. Nor has Defendant demonstrated how same-sex marriage would adversely affect the public."

Evan Wolfson, a member of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's Marriage Project, argued the case along with Hawaii civil rights attorney Dan Foley. Wolfson said, "When required at our trial to justify its discriminatory marriage law, the government couldn't do it. The court today agreed that there is no compelling or logical reason for discriminating against lesbian and gay couples."

Kerry Lobel, Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, agreed with Wolfson. "The Attorney General in Hawaii had three years to pull together the evidence to make his case," he said, "and the judge wasn't convinced. It proves what our community has said all along: there are

no intelligent reasons why same-gender couples should be denied the right to marry."

Chang's pro-gay decision has been dreaded by the religious right, which attempted to block recognition of the marriages by introducing anti-gay legislation in 37 states. Of those measures, 21 have met with defeat and 16 have passed. More significantly, the United States Congress passed the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act," which prohibits the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages.

Lobel called the Hawaii decision "one small but crucial step forward in a long march toward civil equality." He further stated, "We seek the same rights and responsibilities of marriage that heterosexual people enjoy. Whether gay people decide to get married or not, it should be our choice."

In the meantime, more and more discussion is bound to result from the decision. Lobel is optimistic about this, however. "As this lower court trial showed, information and debate help, not hurt, the case for same-gender marriage," he said. "The public is learning that it is bigotry and intolerance they should fear, not same-gender marriage. We believe the American people will not stand idly by as our families are scapegoated in an effort by the Right to promote an extremist agenda."

Toward that end, a number of gay and lesbian groups have launched massive letter-writing campaigns, and they encourage individuals everywhere to submit supportive letters to the editors of state and local newspapers. The goal is to counter the backlash of hate mail which will inevitably result from the radical right, and to make sure that the voices of reason and compassion prevail.

Ninia Baehr and Genora Dancel, one of the couples who filed the original suit, were elated by Chang's decision. "Our love made it possible for me and Genora to get through this long legal fight," Baehr said from her current home in Baltimore. "I'm looking forward to our love getting us to our wedding on a mountain slope in Maui." ▼



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