

letters

I read with interest Chris Moes' thoughtful editorial last month, in which he ruminated about the purpose of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and wondered whether the organization has served its purpose and should disband. As someone who has served on the VCLGR board for several years, and as someone who regards VCLGR's continued existence as critical to our community, I wanted to take the opportunity to respond to Chris.

Chris is right when he points out that the VCLGR was formed over a decade ago, when we did not yet have any g/l/b/t youth groups or social groups, when we did not yet have an AIDS resource and support organization or a marriage task force, when we did not yet have a newspaper to disseminate information and news. In those early days, the VCLGR helped to fill the void by sponsoring social events, talking with politicians about the discrimination we faced, and establishing a mailing list to provide folks with information. In short, the VCLGR was the only statewide organization addressing the myriad issues facing our community.

As a direct and indirect result of the work the VCLGR did back then, the VCLGR helped to spawn all of the various organizations which now exist in our community, including groups such as the Adoption Task Force and the Freedom to Marry Task Force. The fact that we now have such issue-specific groups in our community, however, does not mean that the VCLGR is obsolete. In fact, I see two very important roles that the VCLGR serves, and should continue to serve. First, the VCLGR is our only true statewide organization; it has a large membership and a tremendous mailing list. It really is the only organization that is equipped to organize and sponsor an annual conference and Town Meeting. The fact that hundreds of g/l/b/t Vermonters attend this conference each year is proof of its continuing viability; the conference serves the valuable function of bringing us together, for socializing, checking in, debating, discussing, sharing information, showing our pride.

Second, the VCLGR serves the extremely important role of dealing with the politicians and bureaucrats in Montpelier on our behalf. The VCLGR has two liaisons to the state government, Keith Goslant and Virginia Renfrew, who spend many volunteer hours each legislative session at the statehouse, talking with legislators about our issues, monitoring bills, lobbying on our behalf. Let us not forget that it was the VCLGR liaisons, and VCLGR members, who were instrumental in lobbying for many of the legislative protections we now enjoy, such as the anti-discrimination law, the hate crimes law, and the second parent adoption law, among many others.

Finally, and most importantly, we cannot overlook the fact that the VCLGR, to a degree unlike any other g/l/b/t organization in this state, has name recognition and respect within the (mostly straight) political estab-

lishment. While other organizations, such as Outright and Vermont CARES, are also well known and well respected by politicians with regard to youth issues and AIDS issues, respectively, only the VCLGR is seen as the statewide "gay political lobbying group" on a variety of g/l/b/t issues.

In Montpelier, name recognition and respect are critical to success. Over the years, VCLGR liaisons have worked hard to establish a reputation as savvy, astute, and thoughtful lobbyists on our behalf. They have worked hard to develop a working relationship with the governor's office and other state government offices. While we may not agree with everything the VCLGR may do or say in Montpelier, I would hope that we could all agree that it is critical that we have a presence there. It has taken the VCLGR over a decade to develop its reputation; it would be a disaster if the VCLGR disbanded and that voice, that access to the political powers that be, were lost to us.

I agree with Chris that the VCLGR should not be expected to take on all the myriad issues facing our community; it cannot be all things to all people. Single-issue organizations and interest groups are much better equipped to address those matters. Instead, the VCLGR should concentrate on the two things it has done so well for so many years: organize the annual conference, and monitor the goings-on in Montpelier to protect our political interests.

The VCLGR is uniquely equipped to do these two things among all our other organizations, and if it continues to do these two things it will more than justify its continued existence. Serving these two functions alone makes the VCLGR an invaluable community resource.

Sincerely,
Susan M. Murray

This letter is written in response to Chris Moes' editorial in the November issue of OITM. As board members of VCLGR, it deeply concerns us that members of our community do not know what VCLGR has been doing since the passage of the Gay Rights Bill in 1992, and do not seem to be aware of the legislative victories prior to passage of the anti-discrimination bill. Since passage of the Gay Rights Bill, VCLGR has had many achievements, such as domestic partnership benefits for state employees, passage of the harassment in Education law, support for the Rutland Free Library against anti-gay censorship, successfully fought to remove anti-gay language from Vermont's Adoption Reform Law, worked on the expanded Sexual Harassment law, expansion of the Banking and Insurance regulations so that domestic partners were recognized by credit unions, and worked with the AIDS service community to increase funding for AIDS Medical Assistance Program (AMAP) and the service network. Prior to passage of the anti-discrimination bill, VCLGR was instrumental in the passage of Vermont's Hate Crimes Law, establishment of the Human Rights Commission, passage of the HIV anti-discrimina-

tion law and formation of Vermont's first HIV/AIDS Task Force.

Since 1995, VCLGR has organized the annual Visibility Day at the State House. This is a day when organizations from our community are present at the State House to speak to legislators and state officials about their organizations and the needs of our communities. Last year more than half of the legislators wore pink triangles with the word ALLY written on it provided by VCLGR. What a great sight.

This past year, VCLGR had many accomplishments. We now have an in-state toll free number, #888-825-4989. The Coalition established the toll free number to make it easier for the community to contact us regarding concerns, needs, and exchange of information. We purchased the video, "It's Elementary," and have used it at educational forums and discussions around the state. It is also available to other organizations. We organized another successful conference, and spent time with legislators concerning H.182, the Vermont version of DOMA, introduced by Rep. Sheltra. We continued our visibility within State Government and provided input on issues of importance to our communities. VCLGR organized the first conversation between our youth and Governor Dean. VCLGR was actively involved with the AIDS service community providing ongoing advocacy within the legislature, Department of Health and the Office of the Governor. We responded to complaints from our incarcerated community and advocated for increased services. The Coalition also responded to complaints from survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence who had difficulties accessing the service network and needed advocacy within the court system. The Liaisons continued to make themselves available for information, referral and advocacy to members of our communities.

The editorial stated that VCLGR's Top priority this year is freedom to marry. This is only one of our top priorities along with increased attention to youth issues and continued advocacy for funding for AMAP and AIDS service providers. All three priorities were identified to the mainstream press; however, freedom to marriage was the only one they chose to report. During the legislative session the co-liaisons check each bill to make sure that anti-gay language has not been added, in addition to finding sponsors to introduce gay positive legislation. VCLGR is our only community organization that has committed itself to legislative advocacy and a continued presence at the Statehouse and within State government.

It is important to remember that VCLGR is a statewide organization that has GLBT members and the board, including the Liaisons, is composed of unpaid volunteers. We receive letters and phone calls from GLBT who are considering moving to Vermont or just want information about us. We respond to every request. We mail out resources to help those moving to Vermont have an easier

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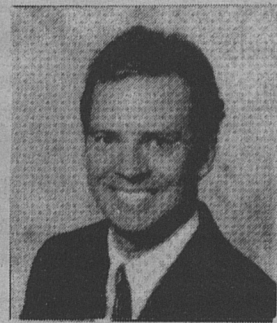


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