

HOWL, A Sacred Place For Womyn

BY ODYSEA

In 1976, I went to the Michigan Women's Music Festival, along with 6,000 other womyn. What I experienced there changed my life. The first thing I remember is seeing womyn playing Frisbee with no shirts on. "You can't do that...!" I thought, but in mid-sentence I stopped and revised it to, "Oh, yes, you can!" I had found a place where womyn made the rules and we were working to create a space that reflected our values and needs and wants. I didn't want to leave the festival—I wanted my whole life to be what I had experienced in those four too-short days.

I was not alone in that wish. In the past twenty five years, many womyn's festivals have been born, each unique, reflecting the dreams of the womyn who create it. And womyn have been buying land, re-creating spaces for themselves and other womyn to live more sanely, extending the festival experience into their daily lives.

HOWL, womyn's land in northwestern Vermont, is 50 acres of land held in trust for all womyn. Nestled in the foothills of Camel's Hump, edged by national forest, at the end of a gently climbing dirt road, HOWL is the heartchild of a group of visionary womyn in the Burlington area. It is a refuge, a peaceful nature retreat for womyn and children who live in towns and cities, a place for gatherings, potlucks, celebrations, work and playshops. And it is a place to live.

In the spring of 1995, I moved to HOWL as a Caregiver. I made a three month commitment to be a caretaker of the land and buildings, and to be a fund-raiser, and to welcome all womyn who came to visit. The rightness of my being there was made clear the first morning at the breakfast table when Glo said to me, "You know, if you see anything that you want to change, you have as much right to do that as anybody else." As caregiver, I was considered an equal. I decided I had lived and gone to heaven!

Many womyn have accepted the weighty responsibility for making sure that HOWL continues to thrive and each has a unique perspective of her task. For me, everyday was a new adventure. During the spring and summer that I was there, we averaged 12-15 womyn per night staying on the land. There were small groups who stayed for months; there were traveling womyn who camped overnight or for a week. There were womyn and children in the garden, in the pond, building a sauna, celebrating cronings and coming of age rituals. We had meetings and potlucks and workshops. Lone womyn came for an afternoon to take a nap, carrying their blanket up the hill, disappearing over the ridge. All came to get a quick fix of womospace, so rare, juicy and nourishing. Projects happened organically, with anyone joining in who cared to, doing whichever piece she felt comfortable with. There was music and laughter and talk, lots of talk. We fed our bodies and our spirits.

HOWL is a place where

womyn have the opportunity to create community: the kind of community we all dream of sharing some day. There are very few places in the world like HOWL. She is continually changing and evolving, depending on which womyn are currently taking responsibility for making sure she stays vital and alive. She is a pre-

cious resource. As long as HOWL exists, no woman need ever be homeless. And every woman has a place where it is possible for her to be a part of building a dream.

Odysea is currently living, working, and trying to figure out what life is about in w. Lebanon, NH.

For the Record...

- Excerpts from couples' final filing in same-gender marriage suit:

"The state cannot and does not justify the disabilities the law imposes on gay and lesbian Vermonters and their families with reference to some broad, collective community purpose but, rather, essentially relies on community prejudice against gays and lesbians and their families in support of its discrimination. Simply put, in its various attempts to rationalize its discriminatory regime, the state essentially suggests that same-gender couples, and the families they form, are not worthy of the protection, supports and obligations available to different gender couples. ... The Vermont Constitution does not allow the state to codify community prejudice in that way."

"The plaintiffs in this case do not seek to take anything away from different-sex marriages; they simply seek for their own families the same legal protections and obligations enjoyed by other families in the state of Vermont."

"The state's claimed interest in promoting child-rearing in a setting which provides males and female role models flies in the face of the legislature's own actions, does not state a valid purpose and is not reasonably related to the state's discrimination."

"The state makes the circular argument that the protections and obligations of civil marriage should be limited to heterosexual marriage because they always have been so limited. While a history of discrimination against same-gender couples may explain the exclusionary nature of the marriage laws, it does not justify such exclusion."

"The state cannot merely assert a tradition of man-woman marriage in defense of its marriage laws: It must justify continuation of that tradition. The state attempts to do so by asserting that any change would somehow 'destabilize marriage.'"

"The state's comparison of the social consequences of same-gender couples forming lifelong, loving, committed unions with one another to the effects of underage drinking, sexual relations with children, and prostitution, to name but a few ... is certainly unflattering, and, indeed hurtful the plaintiffs in this case as well as the thousands of other gay and lesbian Vermonters who work hard at their jobs, volunteer in their communities, live with integrity, and cherish their families. ... Particularly troublesome is the state's citation to Vermont's law prohibiting bigamy and polygamy. ... In raising the specter of polygamous marriages in response to the request of these three monogamous couples for access to the legal protections and obligations that accompany civil marriage, without discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual orientation, the state distracts from the real issues in this case."

"Nothing about these plaintiffs, or the other same-gender couples in the state of Vermont who would marry, threatens to undermine the moral framework upon which the Vermont community rests. If the state believes otherwise, it is because it has embraced baseless myths about gay and lesbian lives. Such an irrational basis cannot validly support the state's discriminatory laws."

- Excerpts from the Attorney General's final filing:

"Despite this evidence, plaintiffs have used the Legislature's decision not to afford marital status to unions of the same sex to claim that Vermont's laws show contempt for the gay population and merely codify societal prejudices. To plaintiffs, extending marriage laws to cover same-sex unions would not even constitute a dramatic development. The state cannot agree."

"Whether one is in favor of plaintiff's position or that of the defendant, it would be impossible to characterize permitting same-sex marriages as anything other than a watershed change in the law."

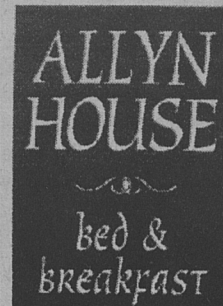
"What plaintiffs ask the court to do here is change the name of their relationship in

Curbside

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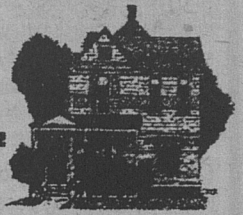


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