

T.I.P.?

educate the public. According to Keith Goslant, one of two co-chairs between the coalition's board of trustees and Governor Dean, "Some of the things that the coalition is doing is continuing an open dialogue with legislative leaders in the House and the Senate. [We are] keeping track of letters and phone calls to legislators regarding issues that may be hostile to our community, and we are continuing to work with the commissioners and leaders within the state governments... talking about policies and procedures to ensure that they're agencies are friendly and supportive to us."

Additionally, old relationships are being renewed to ensure that recent progress does not unravel and new opportunities are being actively pursued. In the near future, Goslant will be leading an in-service at the police academy on hate motivated crimes and VCLGR hopes to remain active within public education, forums, radio shows, and civic organizations.

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force (VFMTF) is another unit hoping to continue their work in attempting to achieve the right to marry for all people. With the case of three couples suing the state for the right to marry now in Vermont Supreme Court, VFMTF

is diligently spreading the word that "we are here and we deserve to be treated equally," according to task force leader, Deb Lashman. Points addressed in their conversations with other Vermont citizens include: the distinction between civil and religious marriage, as well as the myths concerning GLBT people. Also, VFMTF has met with editorial boards of

"We are here and we deserve to be treated equally."

numerous publications and given them packets of information, which sometimes results in favorable articles. As Lashman stated at a recent emergency town meeting, "We want to continue doing what we've been doing. I look at this as an opportunity to educate people and promote issues. Being out there and being visible is the ultimate political message."

A third agency taking steps in response to the recent attack is OutRight Vermont, which continues to battle many extremist groups. While OutRight rarely receives harassing or obscene phone calls, on the day the flyer was released, "We got five phone calls in two hours where adults pretending to be children tried to get us to say sexually obscene

things over the phone," stated Tami Eldredge, agency director. One step OutRight has taken in preparation for battle is compiling a fact sheet including research on conversion therapy techniques, 'success' statistics, and research from the American Psychiatric Association. All of this information firmly states that being gay is not a choice and discredits the propaganda

initiated by New Journey Ex-Gay Ministries, whose leader believes being gay is an illness and can be cured.

Combined, VCLGR, VFMTF, OutRight and other community agencies are presenting a unified front to combat the recent assaults by Take it to the People and other numerous Radical Right groups within the state. Community members have been active while attending the recent emergency town meetings and a torrent of ideas have been generated to assist in promoting the equal rights directives. However, in order for these messages to be relayed to all Vermont citizens, it is vital for each community member to take part. Only by working together can we hope to right the Radical Wrong.

tations will change your bigotry into a quest for justice or democracy. Those who seek a world where fairness, love and justice prevail seek these goals for all — not just their own sect or church or race, not only people who think, look or act as they do.

Following Amendment 2 in Colorado, on the heels of the anti-gay initiative in Oregon, and in similar situations enacted by small-minded people like yourselves around the country, deadly violence against gay people has dramatically increased. Anti-gay words lead to anti-gay violence. Your activity here in Vermont endangers the lives of hard-working, tax-paying, justice seeking citizens. Your actions make life less safe for all Vermonters. The name of your little group insinuates that we are not people. This would be an insult if it were not a lie.

Further, gay Vermonters are Vermonters. We are not outside interests, but are your own sons, daughters, neighbors, co-workers, employees and friends. We do not seek special rights by virtue of who we are and how we love, but demand that we not be denied basic rights because of who we are. Your arguments against same sex marriage now are the same ones used to argue against the rights of African Americans 30 years ago. They were vicious lies then, and are outdated lies now.

I will not waste my time with prayers for people, like yourselves, who are so clearly beyond hope. Instead I will turn my wishes to the gay

children, the bi-sexual friends, the transgendered co-workers among you. I will pray for their strength in the face of your fear and hatred. I will hope for their integrity against the onslaught of your lies. And I will wish mostly for their escape from you. I will not endanger myself by signing my name to make myself vulnerable to your attacks. I remain

—A truly concerned Vermonter

Regarding the paid political announcement flyer in Thursday's (Feb. 26, 1998) Free Press:

Marriage is historically dynamic, because its contract through the early ages was always a civil union and only in recent history has the church taken marriage for sanctification. During the early ages heterosexual marriage joined together for monetary reasons and the homosexual marriage for love.

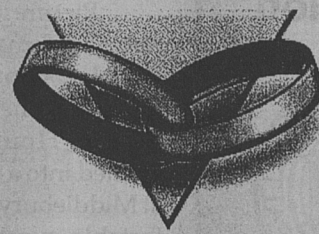
As a Vermonter believing in our grassroots democracy and self-government, I can find nothing devastating about two people's union of love being expressed through a lifetime commitment in a marriage contract. I see no "force" against anyone due to an effort being made by three sets of Vermonters to have a legal decision made for equal citizens' rights through the Supreme Court.

The U. S. Supreme Court's William J. Brennan, Jr. has left a legacy of justice for civil rights by suggesting that governmental discrimination

against gay people should be judged by the same strict standard as race discrimination. He called this an issue of "national importance, an issue that cannot any longer be ignored." He wrote that "discrimination against homosexuals is likely to reflect deep-seated prejudice rather than rationality." He understood love, human nature and how important it was to protect those types of bonds. He saw that the purpose of the U. S. Constitution is to protect the "human dignity" of everyone. The Constitution's genius, he declared, "rests not in any static meaning it may have had in a world that is dead and gone, but in the adaptability of its great principles to cope with current problems and present needs."

If the American Constitution is considered often by history as a "radical experiment" then the claim for equitable marriage rights is long overdue. In Baehr v. Lewin (Hawaii Supreme Court, May 5, 1993), the state commits sex discrimination because while it will allow a man to marry a woman, it will not allow a woman to marry a woman. Homosexuals are human beings with the same basic needs as all human beings. To keep them as lower class citizens by developing new types of human domestic arrangements is to continue promoting discrimination, e. g., "You may drink water, but it will be from separate water fountains or you may ride the bus, but it must be in the rear of the bus... Legal rights, protections, and

Notes From the Task Force



by Bari Shamas

Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force is pleased to begin a monthly column in OITM. To introduce this column let me share a little about who we are and what our goals are.

Two years ago, when same gender marriage became a topic warranting in depth discussion, a small group of people formed - Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force (VFMTF). This group committed itself to securing, through education, full and equal legal rights for gay and lesbian Vermonters including, in particular, the legal right to marry. It's worth noting that not all members of the Task Force embrace the institution of marriage; some do and some don't. The core values that unite the Task Force are the beliefs that gay and lesbian Vermonters should have the same legal choices as our heterosexual counterparts and that laws which treat us and our relationships as second class denigrate all of us, regardless of our desire to marry.

In the past two years VFMTF representatives have spoken with approximately 50 groups. These presentations included churches, colleges, radio and television talk shows and public forums around the state, reaching thousands of Vermonters from Derby Line to Manchester. At these presentations we share personal stories, factual information and encourage dialog in a non-threatening atmosphere. Each time we engage others in a discussion, whether one-on-one or in a group setting, we are surprised, invigorated and encouraged by peoples' reactions to all the issues (and there are many) surrounding same-gender civil marriage. Making personal contact with people is our most satisfying and challenging work.

The Task Force has also produced two videos regarding the freedom to marry in Vermont; distributed those videos throughout the state for broadcast on public access television; provided information to legislators; commissioned an independent Vermont poll on the subject (more Vermonters support us than oppose us at this point); developed a web site; and networked with various Vermont organizations, ranging from gay and lesbian organizations to churches to political associations.

In addition, the Task Force has maintained close ties to the litigation in Baker v. State, the marriage case. As you are probably aware, in July of 1997, three same-gender couples sued the State of Vermont seeking the freedom to marry. That case is currently on appeal at the Vermont Supreme Court and the parties recently filed a brief arguing that gay and lesbian Vermonters are entitled to the same constitutional rights as our heterosexual counterparts. We hope to post the brief on-line soon at our web site: www.freetomarry.com.

Largely due to VFMTF's networking and efforts during the past several years, numerous Vermont organizations have filed amicus, or "friend of the court", briefs in support of the plaintiffs in the marriage case. For example, a consortium of several Vermont religious communities submitted a brief arguing that the marriage issue is a civil, not a religious issue, and that many communities of faith support the freedom to marry. Appended to that brief was a list of 96 clergy members who have signed the "marriage resolution" supporting equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian Vermonters.

Similarly, a consortium of mental health professionals, including the Vermont Psychiatric Association (an early supporter of the Task Force's work), filed a brief arguing that recognizing marriages between same sex partners will help, not hurt, children. The Vermont chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, Local PFLAG chapters, Vermont NOW, Vermont Organization for Weddings of the Same Gender (a group of clergy and communities of faith), the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and the Task Force itself all joined in various other amicus briefs in the case.

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force will be very busy around the state in the next couple of months. Beginning at 6 p.m. on April 2 we will present at a Johnson State College banquet dinner. On Sunday April 5, Bari Shamas and Lisa Nash will be speaking at the Unitarian Universalists Church of the Upper Valley, Norwich Vermont. We will have an information table at the Statehouse on Wednesday April 15th. Friday May 1, we will have a public forum in Brattleboro. The following night, Saturday May 2, Bari and Diane Shamas have been invited to join a discussion at the Westminster West Congregational Church. We are also excitedly planning Gay Bingo: a humorous and informative evening with lots of camp and candor, Saturday May 23rd at the West Village Meeting House in West Brattleboro. And to finish out May, on the 30th, we will have a table at the Brattleboro Area Aids Project's Walk for Life rally.

During March VFMTF has led a discussion at the Brattleboro Area Aids Project Men's Discussion Group and participated in three public forums in Burlington. Representatives presented at a University of Vermont Woman's studies class and at Johnson State College diversity group monthly forum.

There is a lot of work to do to secure civil rights for all Vermonters, and there is no limit to the ways in which interested and energetic folks can join our efforts. Come to one of the events listed above or call Wendy Beinner, 802 652-0723 or Bari Shamas, 802 387-5788, email vfmtf@sover.net or visit our web site, www.vtfreetomarry.org