

Burlington's Unassuming International Icon of Lesbian Mental Health

Journals and class texts line the shelves of one office wall. A Pez dispenser collection occupies another. The contrast in the decor suits perfectly the personality of UVM professor and lesbian feminist Esther Rothblum. Rothblum herself is a burst of color amidst the drab uniformity of the university architecture; in fact her international upbringing and life experience set her apart from your ordinary native-Vermont dyke.

Born in Vienna and later relocated to several different countries to accommodate her father's career, Esther Rothblum experienced childhood, adolescence and lesbianism unlike many Americans do. She spoke German at home, but learned English in British/American schools, and even as far back as first grade she can remember having had crushes on girls. However, Rothblum maintains that it helped to be outside of the US growing up as a lesbian child: "Growing up in Austria nobody assumed that a girl with lots of close girlfriends could be a lesbian," she states, saying also that there was a lot of permissiveness for her to spend the night with her female friends. "I didn't date boys in high school and that was absolutely normal in Vienna. Here I think parents always wonder about that." When it came time to select a college, Rothblum's father encouraged her to attend an all-girls school for its "protective" environment; in 1972 she chose Smith College in Massachusetts, and "instantly became a feminist."

Though she was always certain she was a lesbian or "would at least grow up to be one," Rothblum didn't really identify as one comfortably until graduate school at Rutgers University four years later. Unfortunately, prior to the strong gay and lesbian movement at Rutgers today, "in those days it was very closeted." Though homosexuality had been stricken from the DSM as a mental illness three years before Rothblum's arrival, copies of the book at Rutgers still remained un-edited until 1980. "So up until then you still saw this word homosexuality as a mental illness. And that was my grad school experience." Also while completing her Ph.D. program in Clinical Psychology, Rothblum encountered a very male-dominated environment: most of the students and all of the faculty were male, (except

Kerry Slora interviews UVM's resident Dyke Psyche, Esther Rothblum

for one female who worked with children). Interestingly Rothblum now works with graduates at UVM in the same Ph.D. program, though today "85% of the students are women."

After graduate school, Rothblum did a one-year internship in Mississippi, and that was where she could finally meet lesbian students for the first time. Discouragingly though, the post-doctorate work to follow at Yale University would also be headed by a largely male faculty.

Rothblum wears a wide grin when she talks about her arrival at UVM in 1982: "It seemed like instantly every lesbian professor had heard about me!" Once having had frequent get-togethers, the group of 5 or 6 women still continue to provide a support system to one another—recently they celebrated the 15th anniversary of their gatherings.

Little of Esther Rothblum's time as a professor is actually spent instructing a class; only 6 or 7 hours a week are reserved for teaching, as opposed to the 50 to 60 used for writing and research. "Many lesbian psychologists become lesbian therapists, so therefore there's not a lot of research done," says Rothblum. "I think that again shows how women are not encouraged to publish or write, which you have to do to be a professor." Rothblum goes on to say, "I think the *real* generation of lesbian professors is just now getting out of grad school."

Making a point to come out as a lesbian in all of her classes, Rothblum usually performs the task early on "so students can drop." Fortunately, though, most of her graduate-level courses already deal directly with issues surrounding sexuality, and many of the graduates are also gay, lesbian or bisexual, or are gay-affirmative. And, Rothblum admits, most students just hear it through the grapevine or figure it out on their own.

Much of Esther Rothblum's involvement outside of teaching is professional, and on a national level. She is a member of the gay and lesbian division of the American Psychological Association, and for the last 15 years she has been editing the national jour-

nal *Women in Therapy*. During the last three years she has also had the opportunity to edit the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* for the same publishing company, and during the past year she has been contributing her expertise to OITM with her *Dyke Psyche* column. The OITM column is interesting to Rothblum because she is accustomed to writing for professionals dealing with clients, and not so much for the general reader. "I think I have a lot of work to do in learning how to write in a more accessible way," she confesses.

Esther Rothblum doesn't think of herself as an activist, though she does consider herself 'radical' in the sense that she's really of the first generation to use an affirmative perspective toward homosexuality and not label it as "sick". Any activism that she has done "has been more through writing than with organizations." But Rothblum doesn't hesitate to identify as a radical feminist, and asserts that women's experiences are very different from men's.

Being a lesbian effects every part of Esther Rothblum's life—it has become a part of her teaching, and a big part of her writing and research. As a lesbian residing in Hinesburg (deemed "The Best Town to Be a Lesbian in Vermont" by *Seven Days*), Rothblum observes that there is a "big network of [GLBT] friends, colleagues and acquaintances" in Chittenden County and in much of Vermont.

Though all of her family still lives in Austria, she still remains in contact with them, and her sexuality is "not really an issue." When she first came out they were all surprised, even though she had never been with a man; "but when you don't have a frame for it you don't see it." Nevertheless, her family remains supportive of her work and identity.

"I may have come late to the US, but I came to lesbianism very early," she admits, and those influenced by her teaching, her writing and her vibrant personality may very well agree that the physical and spiritual movement of Esther Rothblum has brought her to the right place.

He's 17, he lives in Franklin County, & is **Bisexual**

Who will speak about his orientation in school?



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Announcing...

The Lesbian Health Forum had an understanding meeting with Vermont CARES on Thursday Evening, March 26, 1998. Vermont CARES has agreed to provide women in need with the Hepatitis B serum at cost.

For more information call Vermont CARES and ask for Amy: 1-800-649-2437, 863-2437.