

THE TASK FORCE



REPORT

BY BARI SHAMAS

In the last two years, Vermont Freedom To Marry Task Force (VFMTF) representatives have spoken in over 70 settings. These meetings are often a forum for members of the GLBTQ community to debate the idea of marriage. Below are some of the questions I have heard asked and my responses.

Q. When gay men and lesbians get civil recognition for their relationships won't they become just like heterosexuals?

A. No, full civil rights for gays and lesbians shouldn't make us anymore like straight people than they made black people turn white. Civil rights will give us the freedom to express our relationships in ways we can't now. And while being sexual "out-laws" has played an important role in our experience, finding a niche within the law doesn't mean we have to buy into the whole heterosexual culture. But I'm also not afraid of some assimilation. Respect is due to those who choose to blend or live their lives "like heterosexuals" just as respect is due those who choose to live differently. I truly believe that our diversity will flourish more and not less if we can marry as we choose.

Q. Why do gays and lesbians want social acceptance?

A. I don't know if all gays and lesbians want social acceptance. But I know that I want to live

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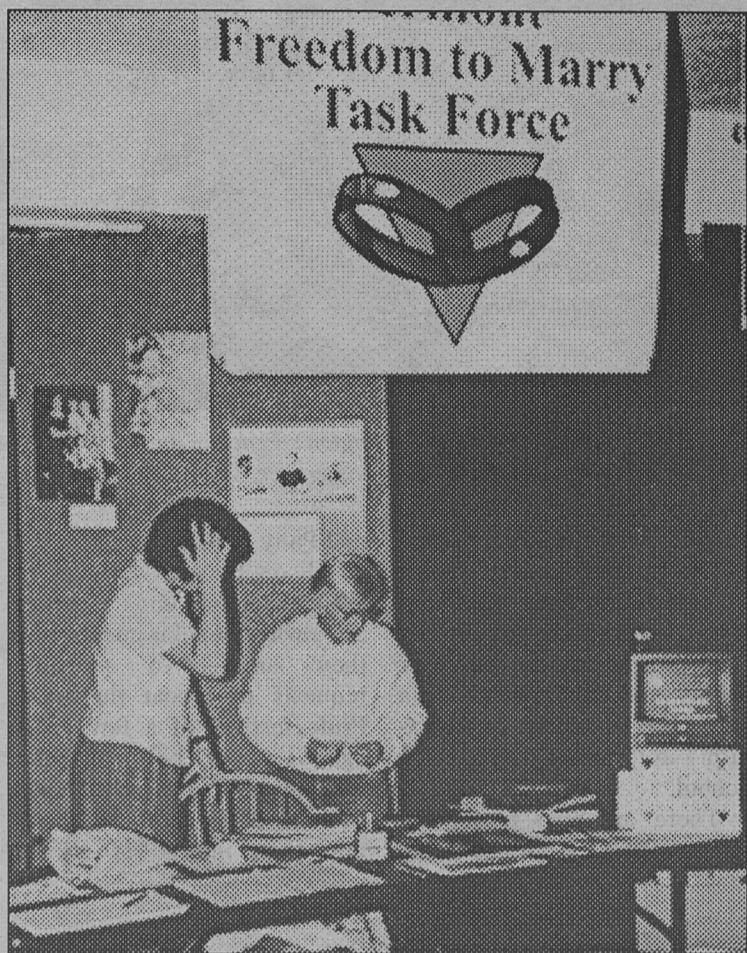
with the same choice and opportunity that my straight sisters and brothers have. And I want to live without fear of violence or discrimination. As a partnered woman with children, I look forward to legal recognition of my family. That recognition will bring concrete benefits to my immediate family that I can't secure any other way. And if that legal status also means that we have to face less homophobia as we go about our lives, I think that's great.

Q. Many churches, synagogues and communities of faith already marry and give support to same gender couples. If you and your religion recognizes your relationship why do you need the law, too?

A. Civil marriage and religious marriage are two very dif-

Questions & Answers

photo: Scot Applegate



As part of their mandate to educate the public about same-gender marriage issues, the Task Force sets up booths at events around Vermont.

ferent things. Over 90 clergy members signed the VFMTF marriage resolution and attached their names to a brief in support of the plaintiffs in Baker v State because they support civil marriages for same gender couples. That doesn't mean they all support religious marriage. Religious marriage or spiritual unions are available at the discretion of individual denominations.

Homespun weddings have always been available to the creative do-it-yourselfers. Though these marriages are real for the participants, they carry no legal status. The state continues to see the "spouses" as unrelated individuals.

The 300+ Vermont statutes (and 1000+ federal ones) which refer to spouse have no application to a spiritually married couple unless they are also civilly married. Among other things, this means that the same gender couple don't have access to many employment related benefits like pensions, bereavement leaves, and family medical leaves. They may not have access to social security claims. They don't get the rights to visitation in hospitals or jails, legal protection for confidences shared with one's spouse, bankruptcy protections,

immigration law protections, or the right to file taxes jointly. They don't have access to divorce laws to mediate separations. Likewise, society foregoes opportunities to hold the couple legally responsible for each other.

Q. Marriage is such a flawed institution. Shouldn't we try to replace it?

A. At this time I do not think it is possible to replace marriage plus there are some good things about it. By giving same gender couples equal access to civil marriage laws we are broadening the criterion. It is possible that our inclusion will improve marriage for all who choose it.

I would like to close by repeating this quote from Angie Dodd. "For our society to deny acceptance to people's different sexualities is like trying to grow a mono crop of one plant variety. In farming we learn that without the checks and balances provided by a diverse biological community, pathogens build up in the soil and its fertility becomes depleted. Soil is the basis for all life on earth; we depend on its health for our survival. Diverse expressions of life are good for Earth's soil and similarly diverse expressions of love are healthy for the human soul". ▼

To learn more about the work of Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force visit our web site. There is a wealth of information. Read the legal briefs. It is fascinating. Check out our Calendar of Events and see where and how you can become more involved. www.vtfreedomto marry.org

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