

## Giving Back to the Community: The Peace and Justice Store

BY CHRIS TEBBETTS

Rocky Steeves and Kathy Bouton want people to think of dollars as votes. The two campaign daily against sweatshop and child labor; for women's co-ops and cooperative projects in developing countries; against big box stores and suburban sprawl; for diversity and small business — all from behind the counter of Burlington's Peace and Justice Store, which they co-manage.

In business full-time since 1984, the store is a fundraising project of its umbrella organization, the Peace and Justice Center. The Center also includes the Racial Justice and Equity Project and the Solidarity Web, which allows the Center to act as a fiduciary for other non-profits.

Bouton, a familiar face to most who have spent any time on Church Street, has been with the store since it moved to its current location in 1991. Steeves came on board in 1995. "We don't want to support 'just shopping' or blind consumerism," he says. In the business of selling both goods and a social mission, "This is the thing we have to deal with all the time...but I think sometimes people don't think [about] the way they spend their money."

The store's wares include books and periodicals, cards, music, crafts, housewares and jewelry, all carefully chosen to fit with its mission: "to pro-

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vide change by providing alternative and meaningful products and educational materials that foster cooperation, equality and a sustainable society."

It emphasizes affordable, practical things, "not just tchotchkes," says Steeves. There are environmentally friendly products, items that support working cooperatives around the world, and of course a selection of GLBT-related items. The store is arguably the queerest place on Church Street.

"When I came in," says Bouton, "I think I made it more of 'that kind' of store. We just kept expanding as the community grew and came to us for things. The queer community is an essential part of our business."

And vice versa, adds Steeves. "One of our functions is as a focal point of the [queer] community." The store regularly gets drop-in inquiries and phone calls asking how to



Cathy Bouton, co-manager of Burlington's Peace & Justice Store often takes the store on the road to community events like the VCLGR conference.

connect with other GLBT people and organizations. It also frequently donates merchandise to such groups as Vermont Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Rights, and most recently to a new GLBT student organization at Burlington High School.

There are also projects—ranging from the serious to the

and Patty Larkin.

Alison Bechdel's Dykes to Watch Out For book signings are always popular events, and they have had multiple requests to repeat their Cat Pride festival of a few years ago. "I'm very political, but I like to have fun too," says Bouton. "I think that's really important, instead of always

of where and how they spend money, and the source of goods. When business owners hear "where does this come from?" enough times, says Steeves, it makes an impact.

Negative reactions to their work have been few and far between — an occasional phone message or complaint letter. "It feels cruddy," says

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(seemingly) frivolous—that get the two managers out from behind the counter. The Center recently produced a Vermont job gap study to gauge the difference between earnings and the real cost of living and to find incentives that let businesses pay a truly liveable wage. It is a good example of the kind of reciprocity they work to create. "Businesspeople are realizing that it gives back when you pay people well and treat them well," says Bouton.

On the lighter side, they have produced a series of benefit concerts involving such notables as Cheryl Wheeler

doing the hard work. It can wear you out."

There are also classes, readings, available meeting space, a library, and an open door policy when it comes to community input. Bouton describes their work as generally "try[ing] to respond to what it seems the community needs, in terms of justice issues."

Anyone wishing to support the Center can shop at the store ("we have a small book section, but I'll special order ANYTHING," says Bouton), volunteer time or make a cash donation. In the broader scope, Bouton and Steeves point out, people can become conscious

Steeves, "but also lets you know that you're out there. It's not good, but it's a struggle and in any struggle there's going to be things like that."

Bouton agrees that the work is worth the negligible amount of backlash. "When we just put ourselves out there in a positive light, it's really hard for people to respond in a negative way. That's one thing that I love about the store. We just keep putting positive images of a lot of things out, and people come in and I think it opens people's hearts." ▼

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