

## THE TASK FORCE



REPORT

BY BARI SHAMAS

W hew Dang, what a day! Diane, my partner of 13 years and I got up at 5 a.m. to begin the journey to Montpelier where we had hopes of watching the historic Supreme Court arguments in Baker v. State. At the bottom of the driveway we fetched our copy of the Brattleboro Reformer where our photo was featured along with a story titled "Marriage Is Missing For Couple." Diane, risking carsickness, read the story out loud as we drove into the darkness. Excepting a few minor inaccuracies, the article was positive and to the point.

As the darkness faded and morning sun lit the awesome beauty of the Vermont landscape, a theme that was to recur throughout the day took shape: how grateful we are to live here in this state. As we approached Montpelier, now in brilliant morning light, fellow VFMTF board member Wendy Beinler drove just behind us.

We joined the small crowd of people waiting in the lobby of the Vermont Supreme Court. It was nearly 7:30 and moments later the clerk informed us that he was about to begin handing out the 45 available tickets. The mood in the room was high. I got number eight. I like that number. In less than ten minutes the tickets had all been taken and an overflow sign-up sheet begun.

Clearly, not all of us who came so early to secure a seat were there to support the plaintiffs. Looking around the room, it was hard not to size each other up and guess who were allies in this effort. Notwithstanding the wide gulf of opinion and moral imperative that separated many of us, the atmosphere was at all times cordial. But the police car, parked

## Sunny Skies

in front of the building, was a reminder that even in this civilized state we need to be careful of the potential for violence. I was glad the town cared enough to ensure this would be a peaceful day.

Diane took over the task of getting copies of the postcard announcing the interfaith service and rally that was to be held after the hearing. I enjoyed a cup of tea and a chance to get to know Wendy better. VFMTF is such a spread-out, task-oriented organization, that I hardly know the folks I work with.

All day long, introductions helped people connect faces with names they already knew. It was the first time since a brief gathering before the case began that I had the chance to see the three couples on whose direct behalf the case was filed.

Back at the courthouse, Diane was passing out postcards and chatting with folks who continued to trickle in. Most were able to add their names onto the overflow list and to have the opportunity of seeing the hearings on a TV monitor just outside the hearing.

I was busy getting some last minute things together for the rally and interfaith service which were to take place at the Montpelier Unitarian Church. When I returned to the lobby of the courthouse it was filled.

The room was humming. People eagerly talking about the case. There was so much hope in that room. So much awe to be a part of history. So much pride and so much caring: deep, deep caring about this fundamental right.

The court clerk repeatedly asked for quiet so that the justices could finish the hearings that preceded ours. We tried to be quiet. Then our voices would begin to rise again, a shush would quiet

the crowd until we began to whisper and talk once more.

Reporters were scattered throughout the room and everywhere they turned there was an articulate, passionate person to talk to. My heart swelled with pride and satisfaction. So many voices, so many lives this case touches.

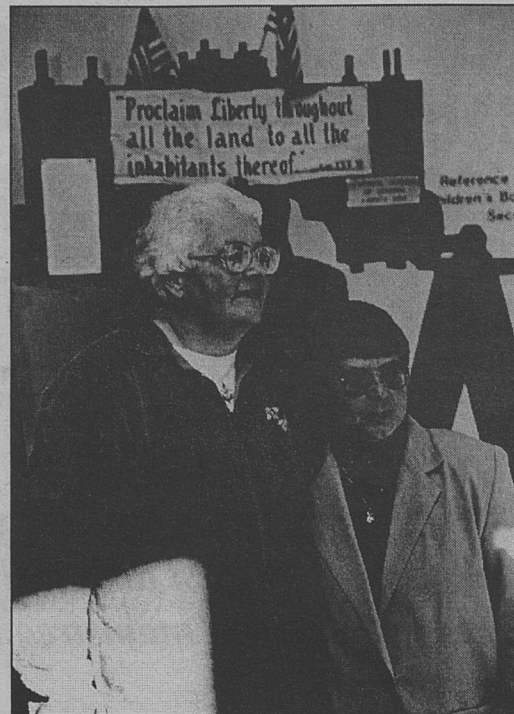
Once more the clerk spoke and we were invited to move upstairs. Those with tickets went first, quickly and quietly filling the courtroom to its fullest capacity. Supporters filled the right side of the room first eager to sit behind the plaintiffs and their attorneys as if the event was a wedding itself.

The anté room filled next with those on the overflow list. With the announcement of the court bailiff, we rose and the justices entered. Beth Robinson, attorney for the plaintiffs spoke first. We witnessed her poise, eloquence and intelligence as she set out her arguments and responded to a barrage of questions.

I was barely able to keep myself from clapping but unable to keep a broad smile from my face in the staid atmosphere of the court room. I smiled again watching the thin arguments from the state's attorneys stretched thinner by the questions from the justices. To my untrained eyes it looked like there were plenty of important holes in the state's case. In a rush of emotion and concentration the hour was over.

After the hearings, I hustled to Montpelier Unitarian Church where about 30 people (including parents with young children) had

Photo Scot Applegate



Lois Farnham and Holly Puterbaugh, two of the marriage case plaintiffs.

already gathered. Rev. Carol Karlson, joined by Rev. Catherine Cadieux and Rev. Jane Dwinell shared inspirational words and led the gathering in singing "We are a Gentle Loving People."

As I sang the words "we are gay and straight together," my eyes met Carol's. She and I have worked in Southern Vermont together for the past two years and I was so grateful to be sharing that moment with her. The interfaith service ended with several people sharing their experiences. My eyes brimmed with tears as I listened to the moving accounts of personal pride, enthusiasm and concern for the future.

When the plaintiffs, attorneys, other spectators and press joined the gathering, excitement expanded the room. I had the honor of sharing my reasons for being present and the honor of introducing all the other speakers. When Beth Robinson came to the podium she humbly received a well-deserved standing ovation.

Everyone who spoke—the three litigating attorneys, the six plaintiffs and representatives from the ACLU and VCLGR—gave deeper meaning to the day and a challenge to each of us to do our part to move the goal for-

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ward. When Stacy and Nina shared how they felt Noah's (the son they lost to heart disease) presence because "he loved a party," they gave us another chance to shed tears. Tears for their loss and for our own long held pains. They offered us the strength and courage to continue moving our collective desire, of having the right to marry, forward.

When the speakers were done, anyone who wanted had another opportunity to watch the hearing on video thanks to Middlebury Public Access TV (and VFMTF) volunteer Joseph Watson. In the back of the room, co-councils Susan Murray and Mary Bonauto were at work again, drafting a press release.

With the video was over, and the church cleaned up, Diane and I packed up our car and took a short walk to savor the day before heading back to our wonderful children and dear friends. The answering machine at home flashed eight times. As Diane helped our children get ready for bed, I listened to the taped messages. Four were in thanks for our courage in sharing our story and congratulations for getting to this place. It was a glorious day.▼

## Stay in touch with the Vermont community between issues of OITM.

We've set up three new e-mail listservs to keep you up to date with everything from the local gossip to national issues.

**VTPrideNet: an e-mail discussion list. LGBT folks from across Vermont — and the people who love them — can now exchange messages**

**If you'd rather get your chatter in one neat package instead of individual messages, check out VTPrideNet-digest. Instead of getting each e-mail separately, you'll get one long message that contains all the day's postings.**

**For those who aren't up for chatter but want to keep up with major newsevent notices and paper deadlines (of course), there's VTPrideNet-announce. There's no discussion on this list — just announcements as events warrant.**

To subscribe to any of the lists, send e-mail to

**majordomo@queernet.org**

In the body of your e-mail, you should include one of the following lines to specify the list you want to join:

**subscribe vtpridenet**

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