

Creating Change Celebrates 11th Year

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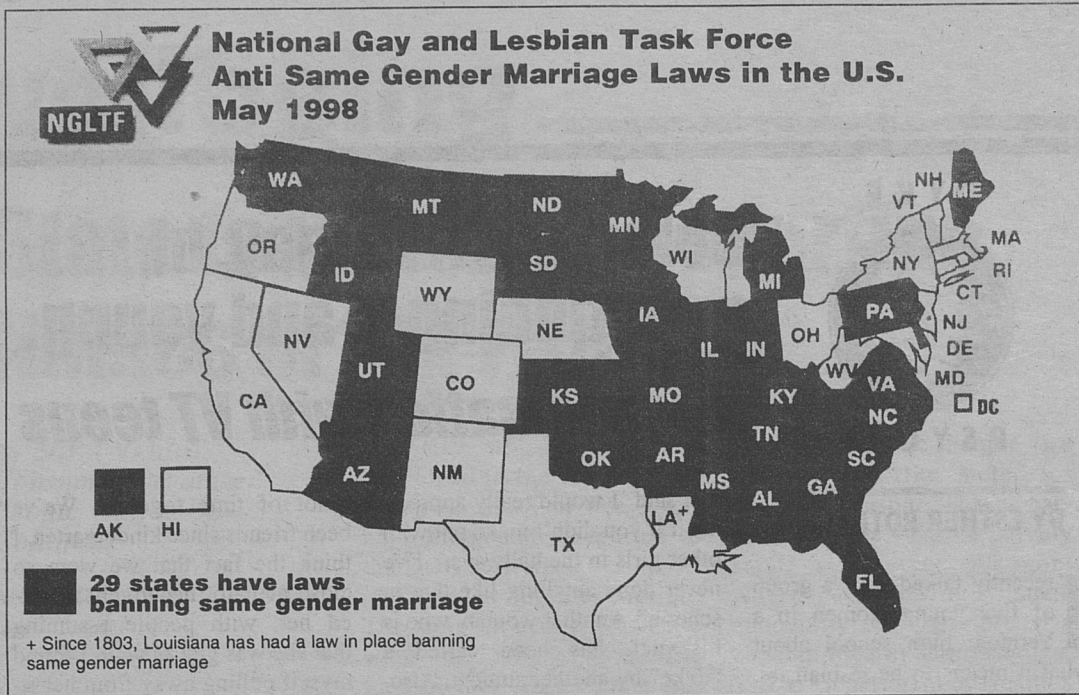
conference organizers to moderate a workshop entitled "Reaching Out Into The Woods." The workshop exposed the ways in which rural organizing in the GLBT rights movement differs from traditional urban organizing where queer populations are more concentrated, have more resources, and often more clout. Moes notes that the repeal of gay rights legislation in Maine last year was due to the GLBT community's inability to reach out into rural Maine where the initiative passed heavily.

Panel member Naomi Falcone of the Rural Maine Network emphasized the importance of using existing rural structures such as the "informal potluck network" in rural areas to facilitate organizing and education of friends and neighbors about GLBT issues. David Knudsen, webmaster of Ruralgay.com, explained the

importance that the Internet can play in connecting rural activists across the country. His website receives over 1,000 hits per day from rural folks who want to make connections in their communities.

Moes believes that, "NGLTF has been really responsive to the needs of rural organizers and understands that some of the most cutting edge politics in the GLBT movement is going on in local rural communities." However, Moes felt, "rural issues were generally unknown [by conference attendees]." Moes along with other rural organizers, plans to lobby NGLTF to add a full-day institute on this subject for next year's Creating Change Conference in Oakland, CA.

In response to the Millenium March controversy, Moes believes that a national march would drain valuable resources from local groups who are organizing on



shoe-string budgets already. However, Moes believes that unlike HRC, "NGLTF has proved that it is responsive to its constituents. If [NGLTF] remains part of the planning process and pushes it far away from where it was originally going, then I think I would attend in 2000."

Bari Shamas, Freedom to Marry Task Force board member and Brattleboro resident, was asked by NGLTF to present the highly successful "Vermont story" of rural organizing around the fight for same-gender marriage at the Creating Change Conference. In regard to the Millenium March controversy Shamas admits that, "Everything I knew about all of this came from Dykes to Watch Out For. I've been so focused on Vermont that this issue didn't interest me that much. I do know that top-down organizing of any kind just does not work. You've got to listen to the people who are doing the work locally," said Shamas.

A first-time attendee and presenter at the Conference, Shamas met many other organizers from New England who felt that their local movements were progressing well on a state-wide level. "We in New England understand the need for rural organizing. It's really very different from the models handed down from GLBT activists in urban centers."

Some of the rural organizing

tactics that The Freedom To Marry Task Force has used include neighbor-to-neighbor education, public access television, community panel discussions including straight allies, and alliances with clergy and local churches.

VOWS (Vermont Organization for Weddings of the Same Gender), an organization for clergy, religious leaders, and religious organizations in favor of same gender marriage, is a prime example of the way the task force utilized an alliance of gay-friendly individuals and organizations to spread their mission into existing rural networks.

Virginia Renfrew, Co-liason to the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, attended the Creating Change Conference as a member of the Federation of GLBT Statewide Political Organizations. Renfrew met with other Federation members to kick-off Equality Begins at Home, a national campaign that promotes and coordinates the efforts of state organizers around the country. The campaign will showcase GLBT civil rights battles across the country by encouraging public visibility in many forms during the week of March 21-27, 1999. Many organizers applauded the efforts of Renfrew and the activists who came before her for the progressive strides Vermont has made in the GLBT civil rights struggle.

Renfrew reminded those who viewed Vermont as a queer utopia that, "Homophobia is alive no matter where you go."

Vermont's GLBT civil rights record is the most progressive in the nation including protections for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in housing, employment, and education. Vermonters enjoy second-parent adoption rights and a hate-crimes bill that includes sexual orientation. However, transgender Vermonters are not protected on the basis of their gender identity or expression. "I would like to see us do some work in extending some of our progressive legislation to the transgender community," said Renfrew. "I'm not sure exactly what the best strategy for doing this would be." Minnesota recently passed its hate crimes law which includes gender identity as well as sexual orientation.

The structure and content of the Creating Change Conference motivated Renfrew to consider improvements to next year's VCLGR Annual Statewide Conference. "I was really impressed with the level of diversity among the participants and workshop offerings [at Creating Change]," said Renfrew. "They gave me some ideas of how to include the transgender community and race issues, and there were so many youth there!" ▼

Marriage Argument Heard by Supreme Court

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Photo: Scot Applegate



During the hearing, several people gathered at the Unitarian Universalist Church for an interfaith worship service. Following the service, The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force held a rally, and a video of the Supreme Court hearing was shown.

uled for 60 and the justices allowed it to go even beyond that.

Interest also was obviously high, not only among supporters, but also opponents. For the first time in its history, the court issued tickets to people who wanted to witness the arguments. Extra chairs were set up in the court chamber itself and in the lobby outside the glass doors. The crowd appeared to be split among supporters, opponents and lawyers who were fascinated by the significance of the case.

Johnson seemed to sum the case up best in a question to Robinson.

"Isn't this case really about whether or not the state can deny this little bundle of rights and privileges that come with the status of being married to people on the basis of sex?" Johnson asked.

It's certainly that, Robinson said, but it is much more, and she cautioned the court against a half-measure that one justice suggested where the idea of marriage might hypothetically be thrown out and replaced by a domestic partnership.

"Certainly marriage as we know it is a bundle of rights and responsibilities. It's also a status and that status has an independent value," Robinson said.

Now it's up to Johnson, Dooley, Chief Justice Jeffrey Amestoy, Justice James Morse and Justice Marilyn Skoglund to decide what the value of that status is — and whether it should be granted to gays and lesbians. ▼

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