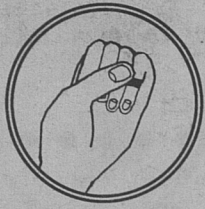


COALITION



NOTES

Visibility, Legislation, & Equality

BY VIRGINIA RENFREW AND KEITH GOSLANT

We're Here, We're Queer, We're Visible

Each year, the VCLGR organizes a Visibility Day at the Statehouse. This is the GLBT community's chance to share coffee, bagels, and ideas with legislators and generally let folks on the hill know we're here and we care.

This year, Visibility Day is scheduled for February 16. Everyone is invited to come along. The day will start between 8:30 and 9am with the aforementioned bagels, coffee, and chats with legislators. After that, we'll sit in on committee work, meet with our representatives, and discuss issues that concern us. There will also be a brief mid-morning State House

meeting with Governor Dean. This is a great time to come to the Statehouse, be introduced to your legislators, and have a tour around this historic building.

Legislative Report

As of late January, we have not seen the introduction of a DOMA type bill or a Constitutional amendment regarding the issue of same-gender marriage — but this is still early in the session.

What we have seen is the introduction of a bill, both in the House and Senate, dealing with HIV testing and sexual assault. As drafted, this bill would allow mandatory involuntary testing of anyone convicted of a sexual assault where transmission could occur, if the victim requests it.

The bill and the issues surrounding it make any response difficult. Do we want to allow mandatory testing of HIV in any

instance? Does disclosure of HIV on conviction provide any real information to the victim? What if it is the victim who is HIV positive? What about services to the victim prior to conviction of the offender, such as counseling, testing, and treatment? Who pays for these services? Will we be advocating the use of AZT for victims of sexual violence in the same manner we now provide it to health care worker who have accidental exposure?

You may have heard or read excerpts from Governor Dean's State of the State address. The highlight of this speech was near its conclusion when the governor gave an impassioned plea for tolerance and diversity. While the primary focus was on the issue of

racism and violence in our schools, Dean has strongly assured us that he means all the ways in

Our community's lack of interest in the nationwide event thus far is a little surprising.

which we are viewed as different. To the governor, diversity means all of us, as we have seen by his longstanding support of social and civil rights.

We will see several bills during this session that will also deal with these issues. The first will likely be

a bill supported by the Office of the Attorney General to amend Vermont's existing hate crimes statute. As drafted, the amendments will allow victims of hate/biased crimes to obtain restraining orders preventing further contact by perpetrators.

There are also several proposals asking for the creation of a full-time position in the Department of Education to provide assistance and training in schools on the issue of diversity and violence. One proposal includes creation of a position in the Human Rights Commission for monitoring and enforcement.

Equality Begins at Home Begins Here

As you've probably all heard by now, March 21 through 26 has been designated Equality Begins At Home Week, when GLBTQ groups all around the country will be hosting events and educating their neighbors. Coordinated nationally by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the campaign's purpose is to show that we are everywhere and we care about our issues.

VCLGR is planning events for this period. Among the suggestions received from NGLTF was that we organize regional "Town Meetings." VCLGR has jumped onto this idea. Town meetings will be an opportunity to organize on a local basis and look at regional needs. These events could also help get people ready for the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage — because if the decision is positive, it could turn very ugly in our beautiful state. As before, we invite everyone to get involved in proposing and organizing these and other events.

Our community's lack of interest in the nationwide event thus far is a little surprising. Last year when Take It to the People placed flyers in newspapers around the state, there was an outraged response from our community. Where are all of you who were so offended by the flyer? Do you think that TIP has gone away? They have not. They are planning what to do if the court finds in favor of same-sex marriage. We need to be prepared as well. By organizing a town meeting in your local area you will have a better idea of what concerns GLBT in your area. Whether or not you support the marriage issue, you will be affected by the attack we could all come under. Please get involved.

If you're interested in organizing or proposing EBAH events, looking for more information about Visibility Day, or concerned about the legislation mentioned in this column, please contact us. You can reach Virginia at (802) 496-4333 or renfrew@sover.net or Keith at 454-8552 or kgoslant@ddmhs.state.vt.us. We want to hear from you. ▼

THE TASK FORCE



REPORT

BY SANDI COTE

Must Rights Make Rites?

What should I get Bobbi for our anniversary this year? Two years ago I finally got her an engagement ring — how can I ever top that? After 31 years, I'm running out of ideas. I find myself wondering if a new toaster would be out of line. I know! I could fill it with roses!

The possibility of civil marriage is just making matters worse for me. It took me 25 years to remember just what date in February is THE date. When we finally have a real ceremony, if it isn't on February 3, how in the world will I ever remember it? Bobbi, of course, will be able to tell me the exact hour, minute and second when it occurs — no pressure there!

If we were to get married in, say, July, which date would I celebrate? Both, according to Bobbi, who says February is when we'll always celebrate the joining of our hearts. The anniversary of the civil ceremony would be set aside as a celebration of our rights.

It's strange that two words that sound alike but are spelled differently actually have the same connotation in this instance. The only way we can participate in the rite of marriage is to be allowed to participate in the right of marriage.

On the other hand, just because we have the right to participate in marriage; it doesn't necessarily follow that we MUST participate in the rite of marriage.

I consider the right to marry

Not allowing us the option of marriage lowers our community to the level of children and perpetuates the 1960s idea that homosexuals are in an endless state of arrested development.

to be analogous to the right to vote — having the right and exercising it are two separate things. Being excluded from choosing for ourselves whether or not to exercise a right is both demeaning and dehumanizing. Not allowing us the option of electing marriage in effect lowers our community to the level of children and perpetuates the 1960s idea that homosexuals are in an endless state of arrested development. Children, of course, are not allowed to marry because they aren't yet capable of discerning the difference between hormonal lust and a desire for lifelong commitment.

Think about it. Isn't this exactly the way the radical right portrays us? According to them,

we are ruled by lust — jumping from bed to bed indiscriminately, living solely for the moment, and for what feels good. This describes nearly every teenager I've ever known — both gay

and non-gay. The radical right, however, believes that gays never grow up. We are stuck in perpetual childhood, incapable of making adult decisions about our own futures.

Before the 1960s, our African-American citizens were treated the same way — as children who weren't capable of understanding the importance of the right to vote. Many adherents of the radical right back then genuinely felt that allowing blacks the right to vote would erode our democratic system. In their minds, we might as well have given five-year-olds the right to vote! Since the civil rights era, all the radical right has done is transfer that belief from African-Americans to the gay community.

Yes, there are those of us who won't choose to exercise the right to marry just as there are African-Americans who don't choose to exercise the right to vote. However, once we have the option of making the choice for ourselves, we will instantly "grow up" in the minds of many of our neighbors. We will suddenly acquire a co-equality with the rest of the adult world and the dignity that we are entitled to as competent members of society.

The right to marry will not be a panacea for everything that is wrong in the gay community, but it will be a start toward our inclusion as active members of the American citizenry. I am looking forward to being acknowledged as a grownup, capable of deciding for myself whether or not to participate in the rites of marriage. Mind you, I'm sure I'll still have trouble remembering the date!

If you would like more information about events or meetings or would like to invite representatives from VFMTF to speak at your place of work, community of faith, civil organization, etc, contact Wendy Beininger (802-652-0723), Roberta Garr (802-223-7620), Bari Shamas (802-387-5788) or Sandi Cote (802-362-2959). You can also email VFMTF at info@vtfreetomarry.org or visit our web site at www.vtfreetomarry.org. ▼