

Op-Ed

Out in the Mountains

Preserve the Past to Change the Future

BY VINCENT DOWNING

If you were at the Equality Begins at Home Dinner in Burlington on Saturday, March 27, 1999, you might recall the Archives Installation along the wall opposite the buffet. I do, especially because I was involved in mounting copies of newspapers, flyers, leaflets and pictures on the foam board and oak tag.

Part of being involved was seeing and handling many of the original documents. This was an unforgettable experience, particularly with the newsletters (now called zines) that came out of the late '60s and early '70s. There was one, "Gay Flames," that championed "Gay Liberation." Another, now a crumbling newspaper, had articles addressing the "revolution" and resistance to the war in Vietnam. Still another, a long feminist rant, had been published with blue mimeograph ink. It was typewritten, with rows of words covered in Xs. This kind of texture in revolutionary polemic is simply gone. The word processor has sent it the way of the Gutenberg presses.

Holding these things in my hands, reading their messages, tingles went up my spine and neck. I felt the hands of the first readers of these documents with my hands. I experienced a tiny bit of the rage and triumph of an earlier time. Ahh, so close! Not more than 30 or so years ago. Within my lifetime. But so far; there is no chasm that yawns wider than the chasm of time, and no bridge more fragile than memory.

A common refrain I heard during the nights we assembled the archive installation and mounted it was "nobody taught me gay history!" The people I was working on this project with were considerably younger than I, in their early twenties. And I've thought hard about this hunger they have to learn about their history. It is the same thing I felt when I was in my early twenties and coming out.

GLBT people have been made invisible and unmemorable. Consider the meaning hidden in the word 're-member:' to replace limbs/members — living parts — back where they originally were. A member of a community is a living part of that community, just as memory is a living part of a person. Without this vital aspect of ourselves, we as individuals and as a community are isolated from other if not in space then in time. We are separated from an essential perspective needed to place ourselves.

Consider how your individual life would unravel without memory. You would live in a completely chaotic world without continuity. You would be unable to learn from your mistakes. You would be unable to grow except for growing old. You could not plan for the future. It is the same way with a community.

An archive of GLBT history would function as the memory of our community. Such an archive is how we can each anchor our lives into history. Without being 're-corded' — woven in again for good measure into the tapestry of world events — we are lost to history.

If we were to tend to such evidence of our past, it would give our political struggles more credibility in the eyes of the world. People would have more respect for our movement merely if they knew we had such things as historical archives, even if they themselves never

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Letters continued

Vermont when I worked on buying the property in Grafton three years ago. I have been impressed with the openness and respect we have received from our fellow Vermonters.

I hope this letter sheds some light on "what those folks do down there." Keep up the good work.

Bambi Gauthier

Mixed Reactions to Domestic Violence Series

Part one of a guide for victims of same-sex domestic violence also appeared in the April OITM. The piece focused on the roots and signs of emotional and physical abuse. The series continues this month on page 22.

Missed the Mark

Editor:

In her article about domestic violence in the queer community (April, 1999), Laura Miller describes certain tactics of abusive behaviors, and wonders why anyone would remain with a violent partner. She asserts that such victims must be in denial about their situations, or must be in need of a violent partner to experience their own repressed anger, or may even be crazy.

I am a formerly battered lesbian. My own situation occurred while I was volunteering as an advocate at a battered women's shelter in Massachusetts; my abusive girlfriend was also a volunteer at this same agency. As I read Ms. Miller's article, I was unfortunately reminded of one of my own barriers to safety and services, one reason that my escape from my abuser took many months. At the time, I was afraid that if I told my friends the truth about the emotional and sexual violence my girlfriend subjected me to, that they'd lose

respect for me and probably judge me. Maybe they'd tell me that I was using my girlfriend to experience my own repressed anger. Maybe they'd even tell me I was crazy. I was afraid that my community would hold me responsible for my girlfriend's violence. I was afraid that they'd see me through the same kind of judgmental, unsympathetic lens that Ms. Miller has turned on all of us who have been subjected to a partner's violence.

Ms. Miller wonders why people don't just "get out" of abusive relationships. I did get out, again and again. Each time, she would bring me presents, she'd cry, she'd make all kinds of promises about changing her ways. When I could no longer believe her promises, and did not give her any more chances, she began to harass me at home and at work, and to threaten me with physical assault. Six years later, I'm in another state, yet I still jump when I see someone who looks like her. That's the legacy of abuse.

My story is just one story. But after eight years of doing domestic violence advocacy work in two states, I can recognize what my story shares with the stories of most survivors of abuse: my ex-girlfriend took certain actions, and used threats and coercion, to gain and then maintain control over me. It's the batterer's desire for power and control which is the essential core of violence in any abusive relationship.

I appreciate Ms. Miller's effort to bring this issue back into our community's discussions. But I encourage her to refocus her attention, to take a break from asking "Why doesn't the victim just leave?", and to instead ask, "Why does this abuser treat her/his partner so badly? Why does this person feel entitled to hurt his/her partner?" These are the questions that will help us, as a community, to support the safety and rights of victims and to

hold abusers accountable for their own behavior.

Celia Cuddy
Burlington

Right on Target

Editor:

I have never written a letter to the editor to any paper before but I really wanted to tell you how great I think it is that you wrote about same sex domestic violence.

I was beaten in two different relationships and the writer of your article could have been writing about me. I left and came back and left and came back and made my family and friends crazy. The abuse was emotional too.

Your article reminded me that I am not the only one. Thank you.

Name withheld by request

Two, Four, Six, Eight, Someone Thinks We're Really Great!

Editor:

I wanted to write to commend you and the staff and writers of OITM for the terrific paper you're producing these days. The stories are well written, the articles are interesting, and the graphics and layout look great. There seems to be an energy, an enthusiasm, an optimism emanating from the pages, and it's infectious. I know you're doing it all on a shoestring budget, and I just wanted you to know that your readers appreciate the quality of your work. Thank you.

Susan M. Murray
Ferrisburgh

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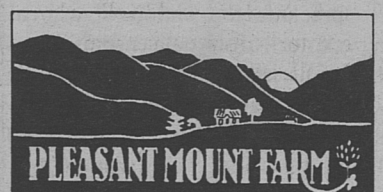
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