

# Vermont's RBA: Mixing Business and Rainbows

BY TIM EVANS

Networking, support, community; these are some of the words the Rainbow Business Association uses to describe itself.

Begun in the fall of 1996, the RBA has blossomed and grown during its first two and a half years. Started by a small group of gay business owners as an outlet to address unfulfilled needs in the GLBT community, early meetings consisted of gathering for lunch and exchanging business cards.

According to Donna Freeman, the elected president of the RBA board, the organization is now a statewide group of gay business owners, professionals, and supporters who see the need to "network and support each other and GLBT businesses." The group's mission statement clearly defines this purpose: "The mission of the Rainbow Business Association, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender organization, is to create a supportive network among business owners and professionals that strengthens our community."

What began as little more than a social organization with a vision for the GLBT community now includes many of Vermont's leaders and allies in that community. Unique to Vermont,

although similar to other organizations around the U.S., the RBA now boasts nearly 85 members and may reach 100 by the end of 1999. It meets on a monthly basis, publishes a newsletter regularly, elects a board every year, and participates in events with other organizations.

The existence of the RBA makes it easier for an individual to locate GLBT professionals. Crucial to that goal is the membership directory published in the quarterly *CommUnity News*. This all-important contact list includes many of the businesses that make up the RBA; it is a direct link to GLBT businesses and supporters in Vermont.

Those businesses vary in location and type. There is a wide range of RBA members in the health, retail, food, and law services. Even though many of its members are concentrated in the Burlington and Montpelier area, Freeman stresses that it is a statewide association continually "building a supportive network."

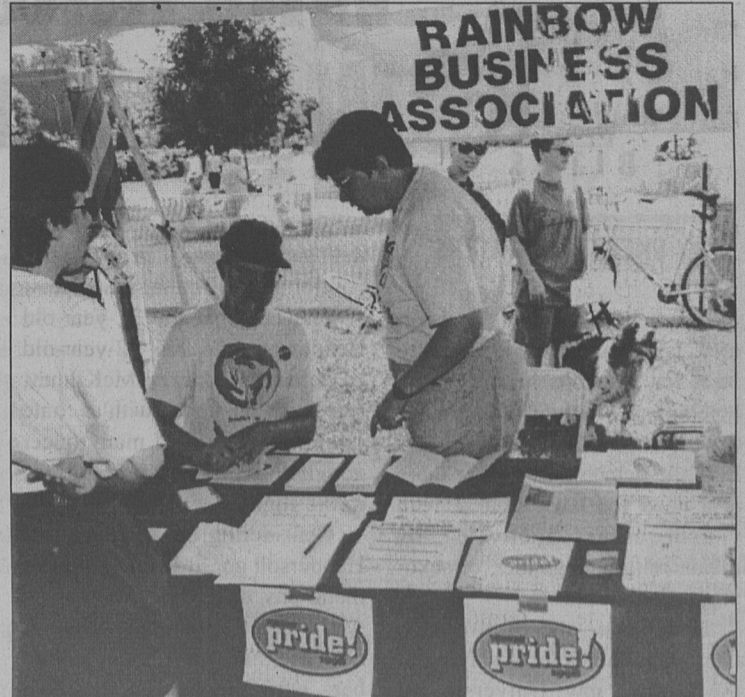
That network is strengthened every month through mixers for members and the public. These events offer an opportunity to get together, exchange news and ideas, and participate in a "round robin," where each member gets a chance to make announcements and share what is going on with

him or her. There are usually snacks and a chance to socialize, but this is not a social organization. It is a group of professionals who are trying to support each other and the community.

Sometimes that support goes beyond the bottom line. In fact, many RBA members are involved in areas other than business. Freeman says some can be thought of as "leaders in the gay community." These people are involved in other projects, such as the Pride Committee and the fight for the right to marry, to name just two. They work in a variety of vocations and touch on many of the non-business-related issues facing the GLBT community.

The organization also transcends business concerns through involvement in outside activities. So far this year, it's been involved in events such as the Burlington RU12? Community Center community supper in March and Visibility Day at the Statehouse in Montpelier in February. In her role as RBA president, Donna Freeman was among members of the GLBT community attending a January discussion with Rep. Bernie Sanders.

With growth has come change. The monthly newsletter is switching to quarterly publica-



tion to accommodate increased distribution and production costs for a mushrooming membership. Similarly, the annual membership fee will be increasing to \$45 from \$30 on June 1 of this year. These changes allow the association to concentrate on new and exciting plans for the community. Freeman says there are many "possibilities" still in the early planning stages. One is a business expo to show people what types of GLBT businesses are out there and what they have to

offer. Another is a youth apprenticeship program associated with Outright to give individuals an opportunity to actually work along side some of the RBA professionals.

What won't change is the RBA's commitment to finding members of the GLBT business community — lawyers, restaurateurs, shop owners, realtors, counselors, innkeepers, bankers and all the others — and bringing them together to support each other. ▼

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