

# Giving Back to the Community

## Sarah Harrington and Valley Print & Mail

BY CHRIS TEBBETTS

So what does it mean to do business in the GLBT market?

"I don't think it's necessarily different," says Sarah Harrington. "I just think it's more interesting for me, 'cause I have a personal interest in it myself. You feel like you're giving back; it's sort of a give and take thing."

Harrington is well qualified to offer an answer. She is a co-founder, ex-president and current member of the Rainbow Business Association. She is also director of sales and marketing for Hinesburg's Valley Print and Mail, one of a growing number of straight- (but not narrow) owned businesses that enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with Vermont's GLBT community.

Valley Print and Mail has become a queer friendly printer of choice for many, largely due to Harrington's efforts. She has made a conscious effort at reaching out to the GLBT community, both as a philanthropist and a marketing expert. The company has donated printing services to a variety of GLBT organizations (the annual Pride Guide comes from there), equipment to *Out in the Mountains*, and is the only printer on the RBA member list. In turn, they have done business with such clients as Ed Flanagan, the Samara Foundation, and Triangle Ministries.

That means getting to know more about the people and organizations in the community, letting

other people know about them, and, in turn, reaping a good number of referrals for Valley Print and Mail. For Harrington, it is a happy upward spiral of awareness, diversity, goodwill, and yes, good business.

"What I find particularly gratifying," says Harrington, "now that Valley Print and Mail has its name out there as the 'friendly printer' are the referrals I get: 'So and so told me to call you.' And that's great, because from my standpoint, it's not just a business; it's a personal relationship too."

Harrington has been with Valley Print and Mail for the past four of its 12 years. The support of owner and president David Eddy has been a constant, says Harrington, as she has integrated some of her interests into her work life.

Her involvement with the RBA and a desire to bring Valley Print and Mail on as a member was the first step. She describes Eddy's reaction as, "Oh, absolutely. I know you and I have never discussed this, but if people don't like that...I don't want to do business with them if they can't accept the way I want to support my employees." That attitude is part of what keeps Harrington feeling happily long-term with the company.

When a photo of Harrington holding a Valley Print and Mail brochure appeared in a Burlington *Free Press* article on the Rainbow Business Association, she wasn't sure what to expect. "It was like, 'omigod,

this is going out all over the state,'" she says. However, she received only positive responses — a mix of the expected calls from GLBT friends and acquaintances and kudos from a large number of straight clients and co-workers. Her nervousness was unfounded and her boss, as it turned out, was never worried about it in the first place.

Beyond GLBT interests, Harrington and Eddy have recently focused on children's issues and local community projects. They have worked with the New England Federal Credit Union on Card Art — a line of kid-designed greeting cards benefiting the Children's Miracle Network — by providing all printing services at less than half the normal cost. This summer, they will team up with Mark Gadue of Gadue's Dry Cleaning, on his Read to Ride program, where children can win chances at prize drawings for every book they read.

Whatever she's doing, Harrington seems to get energy from the cycle of give and take that is, for her, doing business well in today's market. She likes to talk about the sense of satisfaction she gets from working both with and within any given community. "I think you get a lot back when you give," she says, "And I'm not just talking from a monetary standpoint. I'm talking about involvement and the rewards of relationships and networking and opening up your horizons a little bit more." ▼

## Standards Encourage Cooperation Resolution

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perspective on their children's needs during divorce. Lesbians and gay men who formed families and made commitments should not adopt the law's inappropriate elevation of biology over the reality of relationships. The courts and many in our society are confused when they hear members of our community saying that our agreements don't count, our families never existed, and former partners are nothing more than legal strangers, or roommates. How we end relationships is critical to our collective interests as well as to our children."

The standards aim to create a new community ethic by urging the honoring of agreements among family members and putting children's needs first rather than resorting to the legal system to decide who counts as a family. They encourage voluntary resolution of disputes in accord with basic principles of child welfare.

Their guidelines go on, however, to suggest that those who go to court because they cannot reach agreement forego anti-gay arguments that will encourage or reaffirm the law's failure to accord the proper respect to family members not related by biology or marriage.

According to the groups involved, "[e]ven if legislatures

and courts are slow to do so, we must recognize, respect and celebrate that families in our community are joined by intention and commitment rather than biology or law. When some relationships in a family change or end, we must not use the absence of legal protection to suddenly delete a person as important as a parent from a child's life. We must honor our families even if the legal system does not. That means honoring the commitments we have made to our children and to each other, and acting in the interests of the children."

The groups point to a recent decision from a California Appeals Court to illustrate the problem. The court ruled that, without the legislature making changes to the current law, it had no power to intervene on behalf of a lesbian mother with no biological or adoptive ties unless she showed the biological parent to be entirely unfit for custody.

The case involved two women who shared parenting duties for the child they had together as well as an older child from a previous relationship. The couple split when the second child was about three years old; the non-biological mother continued to visit for four more years. Then the biological mother unilaterally cut off

contact between her former partner and the children, depriving them of a parent they had known for the majority of their lives.

"As is often the case in our communities, when the courts believe they are powerless to do the right thing, then we have to help ourselves," commented Bonauto. "Our families cannot be ignored."

An estimated 6 to 14 million children are being raised by gay and lesbian parents, and surveys show that the percentage of lesbians who have children under age 18 in the home parallels that of heterosexual women. Many thousands of gay men are also parents.

The standards project started in January, 1998, when GLAD convened a group of attorneys, parents, social workers, and mediators, to face up to this crisis in the community. They embraced the idea of community standards as a way of providing a core of principles for dispute resolution around child custody issues and preventing self-destruction of families.

After a period of commentary from the GLBT community, the coalition intends to disseminate the standards widely to people who come into contact with same-sex families. ▼

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