

Outright Vermont Celebrates Ten Years of Service to Youth

All photos accompanying this article were provided from the scrapbooks and archives of Outright Vermont

BY CAROLYN ASHBY

You remember the type, or perhaps he sits next to you in math every day: tall, handsome, plays sports, wears his varsity jacket everywhere, picks on you mercilessly. At a school presentation by Outright VT, an organization that works with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, he shamelessly heckles every speaker. For many, this confirms his position as top jock and ultimate straight guy.

What those many don't know is that he

a newsletter to communicate with and support its members, and provides monthly mailings to school-based Gay/Straight Alliances across the state. In coming years, she hopes to "be involved at a younger school-age level and to increase participation in rural areas."

Ten years ago, this active education program — and accompanying developments in direct services for youth — was little more than the dream of a "group of dedicated people who saw a need." Josie Juhasz, a member of that group and first Executive Director of Outright, says she



1993 March on Washington -- (left to right) Peter Thomas, Joe Beauchemin, Kim Thomas, Francis Hill, and Rick Neville.

to tackle the problem.

Isolated conversations became after-hours meetings at the Counseling Service of Addison County, which became regular dinners at various homes. Within a year, the group had chosen an organizational direction, pooled and budgeted their own money, applied for and received a grant, rented space from Vermont CARES (then on Elmwood Avenue in Burlington), hired a part-time director, and headed a group of youth in Vermont's first Pride parade. Core programs such as a hotline, support groups, and a speaker's bureau were in place; the mission was, as it is now, to provide safe spaces and support to gay and questioning youth and education to the community in order to create a welcoming environment for all youth.

The early years were punctuated by "the usual growing pains of young, small non-profits," unexpected allies in school and community librarians, a tremendous "outpouring from the community" of library donations, and an "explosion of presentations to service providers" and other groups. Dot Brauer, director from 1991-92, recalls a statewide survey of high school educators and administrators showing that most were aware of difficulties facing gay youth and cared deeply, but felt ignorant and helpless to do anything. Dot relished opportunities to "shake them a little — to open their eyes and their minds, and interest them in this issue." Brauer also recalls hard phone calls and letters, harassment and threats following heart-breaking news of a suicide in the Northeast Kingdom.

For youth "who had enough courage to take the risk and explore," who found Outright in their search for connection and normalcy, results were often spectacular. Juhasz says, "You could literally see [the

depression that brought them in] lift overnight." Eileen McCaffrey, one of those early youth, now on Outright's board, recalls that it was "so affirming that there were other gay people out there who liked who they were and that having that community made it all okay. I can't even quantify its effect."

Heather Geoffrey sees the same effect in today's Speaker's Bureau youth. "The opportunity to be heard, to hear other people's stories, and to see they're not alone," she says, is incredibly empowering, as is attending presentations where youth discuss the effects of homophobia in their lives.

In 1992, Outright moved to its current office space on College Street. The next year, Karin Eade became director, after having been a student intern and then assistant director.

Over the next several years, momentum and connections were built that led to the Building Bridges to Equity Conference. Co-sponsored by the Vermont departments of education and health, the 1996 conference drew 250 mental health, youth service, government, and school professionals, parents and youth for a day of presentations and workshops devoted to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and their families. With an inspiring keynote by Catriona McHardy, director of education for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, this powerful conference had ripple effects long afterward. Many of the young people who attended at ages 12 or 13 "came out with a bang shortly thereafter. One joined Outright's Speakers Bureau," notes current director Tami Eldridge.

That year also saw the direct services coordinator position become full time as Tage Lilja celebrated his first anniversary working with Outright.



Pride Day 1998

walked up to the panel facilitator afterwards to say, "I'm sorry I had to do that, but I couldn't let them know it was me you were talking about."

It's a true story, one of Education/Outreach Coordinator Heather Geoffrey's most vivid memories of her work at Outright Vermont.

Hired in October 1998, bringing Outright's full-time staff to a "huge" total of three, Heather has expanded the Speaker's Bureau's capacity — during 1998, it gave 69 presentations to almost 2000 people statewide. She also publishes

"didn't know it could go so far. Where Outright is now has surpassed my wildest dreams."

In 1988, conversations about the needs of GLB youth had been happening for some time. Then news of a national report on youth suicide trickled out. Statistics deeming gay youth three times more likely to attempt suicide — and more likely to succeed — than their heterosexual peers "jolted folks into action." Josie, Bill Lippert, Howdy Russell, Naomi Tannen, Keith Goslant, and many others began to consider starting a non-profit organization

(Located in the same space as Jerome the Florist)

The Jeweler's Bench

Patricia Palumbo
Designer ~ Jeweler

Custom Design
Jewelry Repairing
Fine Handcrafted Jewelry

260 North Main Street, Barre, VT 05641 ~ 802-479-1496

vt toll free: 877-557-7236 ~ email: ppalumbo@sover.net

GAYELLOW PAGES™

INFORMING THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY SINCE 1973

All editions include a separate WOMEN'S SECTION

USA/CANADA: \$16 by first class mail Includes all states and provinces, national headquarters of organizations, mail order companies, etc.

EAST and SOUTH Edition: \$10 by first class mail
AL, AR, AZ, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, HI, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MO, MS, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OH, OK, PA, PR, RI, SC, TN, TX, US Virgin Is, VA, VT, WV

You can order directly from the address above, or you can find us at local gay-friendly bookstores, such as



Peace & Justice (Burlington) 802-863-2532
Everyone's Books (Brattleboro) 802-254-8160
Bear Pond Books (Montpelier) 802-229-0774



For an application to be listed (no charge), or for details of current editions and prices, or information about mailing labels, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Renaissance House, PO Box 533-OIM, Village Station, New York, NY 10014 212-674-0120

gayello@banet.net

http://gayellowpages.com