

Outright turns 10
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(left to right) Tami Eldridge, Palmer Legare, Kerry Stora, Marck May, Tage Lilja, Duke Moulton on a 1998 lobbying trip to Washington, DC.

Rutland, who challenged their school to live up to its non-discrimination policies, and Palmer Legare, featured in Time magazine for founding a GSA at his Cabot school and supporting student efforts at other schools. Palmer in turn credits Outright, which, he says, "gave me the stability and confidence in myself to do me the things I'm doing now. If it weren't for them, I would probably still be struggling."

Approximately 275 youth accessed Outright's Direct Services in 1998, a substantial increase over 1997. Since 1991, through direct service and education, Outright has touched the lives of more than 15,000 Vermonters of all ages. Direct Services Coordinator Tage Lilja oversees weekly support groups, an 800 hotline, Reaching Out — a 'zine by and for GLBTQ youth, and activities in the Xando youth space. This "constellation of ways that youth can access our resources," he says, is essential to responding to the varying needs of Vermont's youth. Recent years have seen growth in email contacts, and a recent grant will help Outright revamp its Web site to make it more youth-friendly and perhaps enable youth to connect with each other online.

Opportunities for support and leadership through direct services have expanded exponentially over the last few years. Some of this growth can be attributed to increased civil rights protections in Vermont over the years. One of the more exciting developments this has made possible is the Youth Planning Committee, begun in December 1998. This group of youth plans and implements activities they feel are important to them. The focus and energy this group brings to Outright's programming contributed greatly to the success such events as the Heroes and Villains prom and Youth Pride this past spring. Lilja would like to see youth involvement grow to include "some stipend positions and opportunities for young people to join the board."



The Outright Vermont staff, (l to r) Heather Geoffrey, Tami Eldridge, and Tage Lilja at the 1999 Hero's and Villians Prom.

Outright youth are finding ways to be involved in the broader community as well. For the last two years, an Outright-supported and youth-facilitated Queer Youth Speak Out has been among the most powerful workshops at the VCLGR Annual Town Meeting. The R.U.1.2? Community Center has embraced youth involvement and leadership in its Coffeehouse series. Teens Taking Charge, a yearly HIV prevention retreat organized by Outright and Headrest of NH for GLBTQA youth, educates, connects, and energizes youth from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Watching this group of kids dancing, chatting, and building friendships is one of Lilja's most powerful memories of recent years.

Eldridge has similar favorite moments. The group proudly (and loudly) following the "Youth for Pride, Pride for Youth" banner in June was the largest in the parade, and the second annual Pride Ball @ City Hall was even more wildly successful than the first. "It is incredibly gratifying to march in a Pride where proud parents are carrying our banner" Eldridge said, "and

incredibly moving to see people between the ages of six and 60-something out on the dance floor having a ball at a chem-free dance."

Outright serves adults as well as youth in many ways. Few organizations play a similar role in educating the educators and the larger community. Adults in the GLBT community can find in Outright a "sense of energy and synergy, a new dimension to their identity" as they take on leadership roles and carve out a space for the youth, observes Dot Brauer.

Still Much to Be Done

Amidst the progress, there are cautionary notes. Health issues surrounding GLBTQ youth remain the same as ten years ago; the suicide rates are still far too high. "It doesn't make the papers, but it is still happening in Vermont," laments Eldridge. "The fear, isolation, and stress, the lack of access to information is still extreme [for many youth]."


In addition, today's youth face new challenges. Brauer worries about the new climate of 'cool to be cruel' in schools and the possibility for violence embedded in a radical right backlash around gay marriage. Another challenge comes from within the GLBTQA youth community. Immense media attention to queer identities has created certain expectations among today's youth. "Now when young people gather," observes Eldridge, "they are not only giving each other support but also giving each other pressure to come out and be visible. Because of the circumstances in Vermont, there's an attitude that it's safe for everybody to be out."

McCaffrey emphasizes that it's "vitaly important to have a place for youth as they're coming out, [to offer] ways of finding a healthy community." Outright needs volunteers, and donors, as urgently as it ever has to ensure that it survives and thrives in the years to come.

As McCaffrey remembers well: Imagine hearing about this organization for gay youth, even having been to a meeting or two. You're still nervous, feeling tentative, and late for your third meeting. Imagine you've circled the block a few times, loitered at the doorway, finally made your way up the stairs. Imagine opening the door, looking in at the faces in the room, seeing on the couch across from you a good friend from home. Imagine the excitement of "discovering that not only is the community [you've found] full of strangers, but it's also full of friends." ▼

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