

Carey Johnson: Stepping into the Big Picture

BY CHRIS TEBBETS

"Excuse me everyone."
He'll wait for the attention of the group.
"Hi."
He'll smile. The attention seems to make him both glad and self-conscious.

1993, when he began working for BAAP. No large queer gathering with Carey in attendance seems complete without some mention from him about upcoming events or program innovations.

His latest announcement? That he's leaving this job and

is a self-described "big picture person," looking for systemic causes to oppression and lack of health, in all its forms.

"One of my dreams," he says, "is to expand the public health and human rights framework currently under construction to incorporate environmental

New York City, where he had worked briefly with ACT-UP. "But, alas, homophobia is pernicious and persistent, and I didn't really really come out of the closet until after I moved to Vermont...[and] began to volunteer at the AIDS Project."

That volunteer experience led to a job as the agency's first MSM (men who have sex with men) outreach educator, and eventually to the fully realized prevention program that exists today. Johnson has been present for the development of a spectrum of community-based trainings and support systems, including a widely distributed newsletter, the "H.O.T. for Life" (HIV/AIDS Outreach Team) program, and the newly developed Young Gay and Bisexual Men's Program, to name a few.

But to hear him tell it, it is relationships with people that really make the difference. Asked if he has words of advice for his replacement (Vic Hernandez, newly arrived from San Francisco), he doesn't have to search for an answer. "The hardest thing is relationships. All the social activities, the newsletter, the planning — all that's the infrastructure that supports the meaningful and interesting relationships that are the heart of the work." A favorite memory for him, he says, will be a recent goodbye party, "being there and looking on the faces of these 30 guys and knowing that I've been involved in many of their lives and watched them grow as people in the world."

Carey's personal affinities are as diverse as his programming. He cites such influences as pioneering AIDS researcher Jonathan Mann, BAAP's executive director, Susan Bell, Dr. Seuss, Martin Luther King, Jr., and most particularly, Richard, the man he "buddied" with when he first volunteered at BAAP. He was present for Richard's death, and it was a transformative experience. "It was touching to see this man who did not want to die,

came from a big family, and died alone, except for me. Seeing this led me to want to resolve that situation — this doesn't have to happen this way."

Since that time, Johnson's experience of the epidemic and his understanding of prevention issues have increased exponentially. Progressive approaches have left behind the "just say no" model to make room for a much more complex series of factors. "How people see themselves, support they get from peers, skills they've been taught, or can acquire, contributing factors such as negotiation in relationships," are some of things he has tried to respond to in his work. "As I learned more about it," he says, "I saw it as a global issue, encompassing a whole series of realities. One thing that is fascinating about HIV is that it encompasses so much — political issues, social issues, economic issues. It's a big picture epidemic for a big picture guy."

So off he sets; Mr. Johnson goes to Cambridge. Sad as he is to leave Vermont — and the many relationships his work has afforded him — behind, he remains optimistic. "One of my fears is leaving behind something that's been good to me. But I hope to take the skills and experiences and values that have been validated here wherever I go. I hope to take the spirit of Vermont with me. Vermont was the first place I'd ever been where I ever felt validated, in terms of what I felt inside — whether it was 'we really don't need another WalMart,' or functioning as a fully integrated member of our community. And that's very precious."

Where this is all leading him is yet to be seen. Carey looks forward to finding out himself — maybe a return to Vermont, maybe somewhere he hasn't thought about yet. Either way, if history is any indication, we'll know when he knows. Just wait for the announcement. ▼

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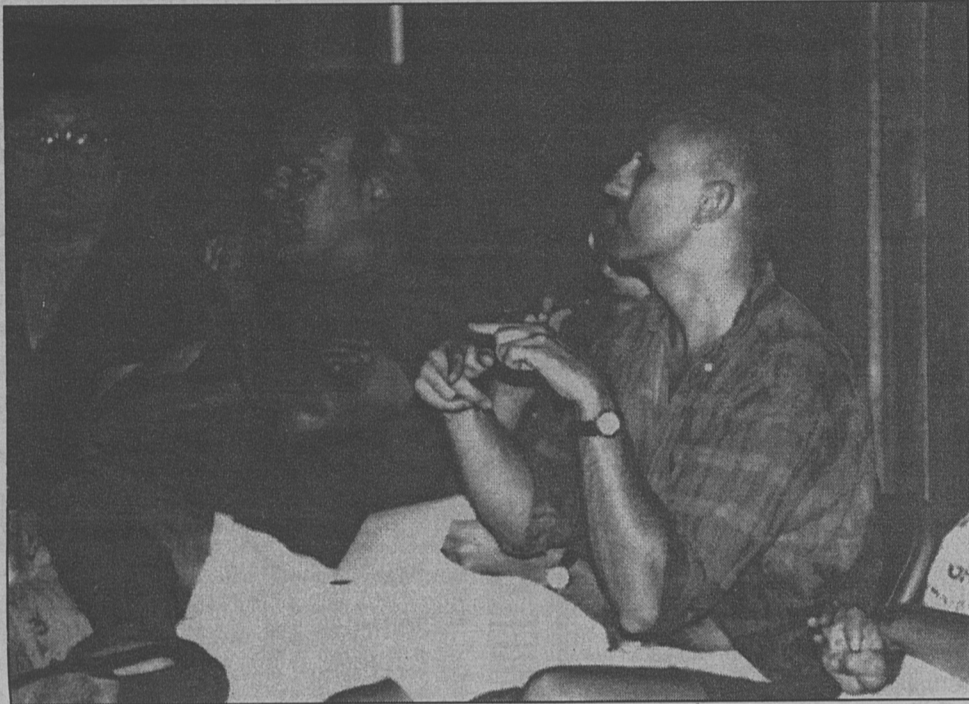


photo Scot Applegate

Carey Johnson (right) is leaving the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project to pursue graduate studies. He is pictured here at the Leadership Summit held in 1998 at Goddard College.

"I'm Carey Johnson, from the Gay and Bisexual Men's Program at the Brattleboro Area AIDS Project."

The wordy title falls off his tongue easily, and you can tell he's used to doing this.

"I just have a few announcements I'd like to make."

A few in the crowd who know him might groan in mock exasperation.

If nothing else, Carey has earned a reputation for his announcements. He's been making them all over Vermont since

Vermont as well — at least for now. The Master of Science he'll begin pursuing this fall at Harvard's School of Public Health is a natural extension of the work he's done here. In addition to six years with the AIDS Project, he served energetically on the board of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights from 1993-1996.

Besides making announcements along the way, he has been a proponent of positive social, political, spiritual, and environmental change at every turn. He

issues, not simply from an environmental health perspective but from an environmental systems perspective....[For example,] how can environmentalists, public health officials and human rights activists communicate with one another in such a way that shares and advances agendas?"

Johnson describes a relationship between his public support of these agendas and his own personal out-ness in the community. He arrived in Vermont in 1991 from Alabama, by way of

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