

# The Country Reacts to the Landmark Vermont Decision

## The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force commended today's Vermont Supreme Court ruling which affirms the constitutional right of all Vermonters to the benefits and responsibilities of marriage. Task Force volunteer Sandi Cote described the decision as a matter of basic fairness: "My partner, Bobbi, and I have shared a home, a family, a deep love, and a powerful commitment to one another for over 32 years. We're gratified that the Supreme Court has recognized a long-standing imbalance of equality."

The effect of the Court's decision has been suspended to permit the Legislature to consider and enact legislation consistent with the newly created constitutional mandate. Attorney Deborah Lashman, also a Task Force volunteer, looks to the legislature for quick and simple response. "My partner and I have raised our sons together from birth. We're thrilled that the Court has removed the stigma of sec-

ond-class citizenship on our family. The only logical route for the legislature from here is to do the same. Anything short of marriage, domestic partnership laws, for example, evokes the old idea of separate but equal, which history shows is anything but equal."

Referring to Vermont's distinction as the first state to prohibit slavery in 1777, Task Force volunteer Chris Tebbetts noted: "Once again Vermont affirms that all citizens are entitled to equality under the law."

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force is an association of individuals and organizations committed to public education about same-sex couples and the families they form. Cote explains, "Our job has not ended with this decision. We must be there to address the misunderstandings and confront the ingrained intolerance. The Supreme Court has done the right thing. Now we want to see the legislature do the same." ▼

(Right) At the Decision Day gathering at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Burlington, Lil Venner of the Lake Champlain Chapter of PFLAG spoke emotionally of her pride in being considered a part of the community and the joy she was feeling as a result of the decision



(Far Right top) Rev. Gary Kowolski welcomed the crowd to the church.

(Far Right bottom) Many people brought their children to share in the historical excitement.

## National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Dec. 20, 1999 - Today's historic decision by the Vermont Supreme Court that the state must provide the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples is a ground-breaking ruling that represents a seminal shift in the way gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered families forever will be viewed.

"The court's decision is unique in that it commands that the state give same-sex couples every benefit and protection that it currently provides to married couples," said Paula Ettelbrick, attorney and Family Policy Director at the NGLTF Policy Institute. "The decision is a significant step forward for our community and makes Vermont the second state Supreme Court to rule that the Constitution protects our relationships."

"However, by stopping short of fully recognizing the freedom to marry, the court has opened the door to complete equality but has not constitutionally guaranteed it. Now the

battle progresses to the Vermont Legislature," Ettelbrick continued. "We have the opportunity as a community to convince lawmakers to provide the full badge of citizenship by recognizing the freedom to marry."

Ettelbrick noted that Vermont is a logical state to become the first to recognize same-sex civil marriage. It was the first state to offer domestic partner benefits to state workers, one of the first states to recognize second-parent adoptions and one of the first states to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Ettelbrick praised the work of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force, Boston-based Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders and attorneys Mary Bonauto and Beth Robinson. She also praised the individual plaintiffs in the case - Holly Puterbaugh and Lois Farnham, Stan Baker and Peter Harrigan, and Nina Beck and Stacy Jolles. "These

brave individuals have opened the door to fairness, freedom and equality," Ettelbrick said. "The words, 'liberty and justice for all' have never rung with such clarity and truth."

But Ettelbrick warned that Vermont's landmark court decision may now fall squarely within the crosshairs of religious extremists who will step up efforts to demonize the Supreme Court and denigrate GLBT family values. "We expect a backlash and will be prepared to protect the safety and sanctity of GLBT families on the streets, in the courts and in the Vermont Legislature," Ettelbrick said. "We will work arm in arm with members of the Federation of LGBT Statewide Political Organizations in Vermont and throughout New England and in neighboring New York, where the backlash might be most acutely and immediately felt." ▼



The Samadhi Singers performed for the crowd gathered at the UU Church in Burlington to celebrate the decision.

## Vermont Libertarian Party

Vermont Libertarian Party Chairman Scott Berkey gave qualified praise to the Vermont Supreme Court's ruling that domestic partnership arrangements between individuals of the same sex must enjoy the same protection as similar arrangements between individuals of different sex. Nevertheless, Berkey noted that inequities still remain under the ruling.

"The Court must be commended for neither reinforcing nor weakening the traditional definition or institution of marriage, which we Libertarians think must always

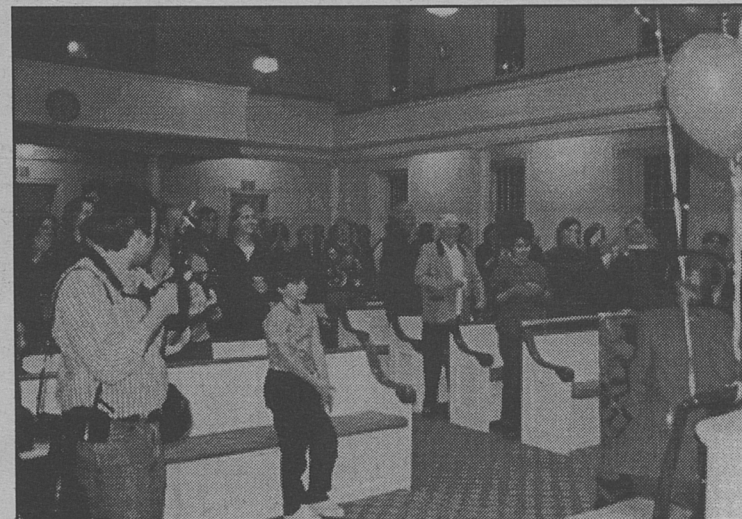
be a private matter to be neither encouraged nor discouraged by the state," Berkey said. "Furthermore, we recognize as well-intended the Court's desire that all domestic partnership arrangements receive equal protection."

"Nevertheless," Berkey went on, "the role of the state should be to ensure equal rights for everyone. Condoning special protection for all domestic partnership agreements might be a step in the direction of equal rights among all those choosing to enter into such agreements, but it discriminates against

those who choose to live singly without domestic partners, and thereby be unqualified for this special protection."

The Libertarian Party believes in individual rights, individual freedom and equal protection of the laws regardless of any lifestyle that an individual chooses to live, even if single. The Libertarian Party offers voters the only realistic alternative to growing state involvement over our private lives, personal property or economic activity. ▼

photos: Max Stroud



The crowd stood and cheered when attorneys Beth Robinson and Susan Murray came to the lectern to speak.