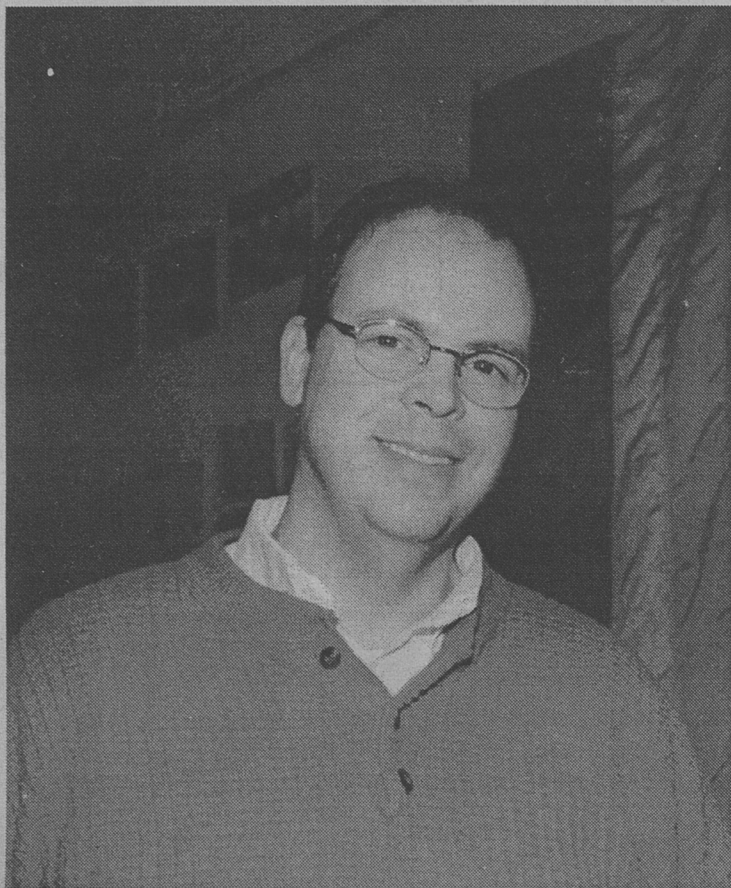


# New Executive Director Hired for Outright Vermont

Photo Max Stroud



New Outright Vermont Executive Director Keith Elston began work at the agency on January 3.

BY MAX STROUD

BURLINGTON—Vermont’s organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth has a new hand on the helm.

After a year and a half as executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico in Albuquerque, Elston began work at the Burlington-based agency in early January.

“We’re all very excited and pleased to have Keith join us,” said David Ryan, incoming chair of the Outright board of directors. “The skill set and experience that he brings from his work with ACLU, as well

as his fundraising and grant-writing skills, are going to be a great asset to the organization.”

For his part, Elston is excited about the chance to work with youth in a strong community.

“I have always felt that we really don’t do enough to try to invest in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth,” he said. “I believe in teaching LGBTQ youth about their history, about the future for our community, about being responsible to their community and supporting the organizations that are helping their community.”

In looking to the future of Outright, Elston talks about

building on their current successes and growing as an organization. He sees Outright as a growing dynamic organization that is “busting at the seams” in their current location.

His vision for the future includes a new, larger space, a support staff and expansion of their fundraising efforts in order to provide GLBTQ youth with “different kinds of opportunities to grow, feel safe and to understand themselves and to cultivate skills to become leaders in our community.”

Ryan said he believes Elston has a great vision for Outright Vermont as well as an energy that will carry the organization into its second decade of work.

“The youth are really going to be the winners in this situation,” said Ryan.

Elston said Vermont’s welcoming, small-town atmosphere played a large part in his decision to accept the position. In researching relocation possibilities, Elston said he and his partner were attracted by Vermont’s strong small communities and proximity to larger centers.

“We felt extremely welcomed here in Vermont,” he said. “We can both work in jobs where we don’t have to deal with worrying about how much we can be out at work. There are civil rights protections here that are in very few other places in the country as well as a much better ‘live and let live’ attitude than in other parts of the country.”

Elston’s interest in civil rights work began in his home state of Kentucky, where he helped found the Kentucky

Fairness Alliance in 1992. That multi-chapter organization has since become a model for many statewide gay and lesbian civil rights organizations around the country.

He has also served as executive director of ACLU of the

Dakotas.

Elston filled a position that had been vacant since August, 1999, when former executive director Tami Eldridge left to take on a position at Outright in Portland, ME. ▼

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turnout is traditionally low, and such a ballot characterizes the sentiment of only a small proportion of citizens.

Representative David Zuckerman, co-sponsor of a bill that would change the marriage laws to include same-sex couples, also cautions against putting too much stock in majority rule when civil rights are at stake. “There are only a handful of issues where there is simply clear right or wrong and this is one of them,” he said. “This is one of the issues that you fall on the sword for politically as a leader.”

A citizens’ initiative proposal was unsuccessfully introduced as an amendment to the budget change bill on January 14.

Perkinsville Representative Gary Richardson’s proposal would have allowed groups of citizens to have their issue on a statewide ballot during an election. A majority vote in favor of the issue would require the legislature to act upon it within 20 days.

“One of the problems with the citizens’ initiative process,” said Renfrew, “is that special interest groups, often financed with out-of-state money, usually organize and sponsor the ini-

tiatives, not ordinary working women and men.”

Instead of encouraging the input of ordinary citizens, she said, it opens the door for well-financed special interest groups to exert influence on the legislative process. “It can become a matter of one minority group going after another minority group,” said Renfrew, “while the majority stays home and does not vote.”

Representative Paul Poirier of Barre City immediately objected to Richardson’s amendment by calling a point of order. Speaker of the House Michael Obuchowski agreed that the amendment was not related to the bill to which it would be amended, and the issue was dropped from that debate.

Meanwhile, in the upper house of the General Assembly, Senator Julius Canns of Concord is seeking support for a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as an arrangement between one man and one woman. Such action would require the support of two-thirds of senators in order to pass to the House of Representatives. ▼

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