

## Women's Equality and Gay Civil Rights

BY JUDITH SUTPHEN

In 1996, the Governor's Commission on Women voted unanimously to join the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force in support of gay marriage. This past summer, the Commission chose to honor the six Supreme Court plaintiffs at a Boston convention of the National Association of Commissions on Women. Clearly, the Commission's support of gay marriage is both long-standing and strong.

So why do those who support women's rights also care about the right of lesbians and gays to marry?

Many of the roaring battles in the 19th century about the status of women were precursors to today's gay marriage debate — whether women should have the vote; whether contraception should be legal; whether married women should be free to own property; have custody of their children, or hold jobs. Much of the fight over same-sex marriage is a fight-by-proxy over one of the last strongholds of gender supremacy — the idea that a man rules a woman, that a woman without a man is missing something essential, that a man who seeks another man is degrading himself by turning into a woman.

Once the theory of male supremacy and female inferiority is dismantled — the theory that man must rule and woman must serve — there is no longer any justification for barring marriage between two women or two men. Once women and men are truly equal — a still distant goal — choosing their work both within and outside marriage as

earner, nurturer, cook, or householder based on their desires and talents, rather than on gender, then what bars two women or two men from marrying?

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equality — at least here in Vermont. Instead, many of those who oppose female equality aim their harsher language at lesbians and gay men, calling them unnatural, just as our great-grandmothers were called unnatural for wanting to own property or use birth control.

Bias against lesbian and gay relationships is based on the belief that the anatomical differences between women and men necessarily entail different gender roles, including the expectation that men should "naturally" be attracted only to women and that women should "naturally" only be attracted to men. Same sex marriage undermines the myth that women and men "naturally" assume complementary gender roles, and thus threatens the stereotypical assumptions that have been used to limit women's opportunities and to keep women in their "proper" place.

Calls for women's rights and gay rights defy gender norms. Yes, as groups, women and men are different, but one can't take the broad generalization and apply it like a cookie cutter to all individuals. Whittling, chipping, or hacking away at stereotyped and outmoded notions of the "proper" roles for women and men has been at the heart of the 152-year-old women's rights movement, as well as the more recent gay and lesbian civil rights movement.

There are many ways to be female or male; that is, to be human. A truly egalitarian society makes room for those differences. When marriage is defined as a commitment to live up to the rigorous demands of love and to care for each other as best as you can, then the right to marry for any Vermonter should be welcomed by all of us. ▼

*Judith Sutphen is executive director of the Governor's Commission on Women.*

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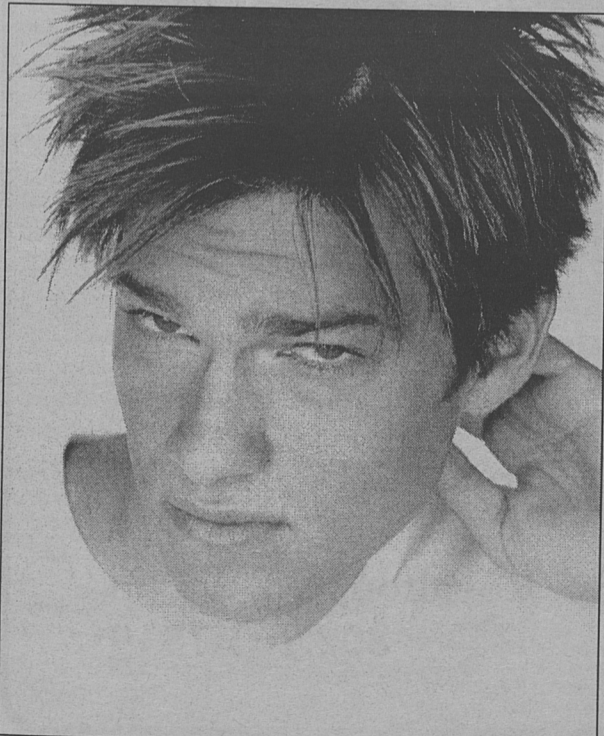
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