

Haven't We Been Here Before?

BY JOSEPH F. WATSON

Two recent events have gotten me thinking about "our" history in Vermont.

The first was when I ran into my friend Louise at the second Judiciary Committee public hearing on gay marriage last month at the Statehouse. As we talked about the evening at hand, the crowd, the process, she said that this round of testimony was very different from the last ones. I assumed she was talking about the hearing the week before, and said something about her braving the drive in the snowstorm.

But she made it clear that she was talking about the hearings for the civil rights amendment in the early '90s. She said that the atmosphere in the Statehouse was less oppressive this time, and that at the last hearings, the hate was on the surface; you literally felt like you could be attacked in the halls.

Later, as I thought about it, I was amazed that she possesses such determination to still be at it ten years later.

The second event came when somebody on VTPRIDENet, the e-mail discussion list sponsored by Mountain Pride Media, asked about the scope of the civil rights protection for queer folk in Vermont. I thought I knew the answer, but I wasn't sure, so I went looking in back issues of *Out in the Mountains*. What I found amazed me.

The very first headline on the first issue of *Out in the Mountains* (February, 1986) reads "HTLV-3 Bill Introduced in Montpelier." That legislation was designed to prohibit discrimination on the basis of HIV test results. At that time, Terje Anderson was "informally coordinating lobbying on the bill." John Calvi, then a consul-

tant to AIDS organizations around the country, testified at the public hearing held on this bill. Fourteen years later, John also attended both of this winter's public hearings at the Statehouse.

The HIV bill eventually became law. Also mentioned in the same issue is "an historic first," when five Burlington area lesbians and gay men met with then-Governor Kunin. The contingent asked the governor to appoint a lesbian and a gay man as co-liaisons to her office. Kunin readily agreed; Beth Dingman of Norwich and Terje Anderson of Burlington were appointed to serve as interim co-liaisons.

That was the start. In 1987, Heather Wishik took over for Beth, and Keith Goslant took over for Terje.

The next few years were packed with legislative activity. A bill to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was introduced to the Senate on January 11, 1988. After a public hearing that went to 1:00am, committee work, and much lobbying by the co-liaisons, the bill passed the Senate.

As I read the accounts of the hearings in *OITM*, I'm sure my friend Louise is right in her recollection of how nasty things were then. In final remarks before the Senate vote, Sen. Francis Howrigan of Franklin County suggested the bill would promote AIDS and referred to gay people as "the society of cornholers." (I'm happy to see that my spell check program doesn't recognize that word!)

Unfortunately, the bill did not pass the House, and died at the end of the biennium. A new version of the anti-discrimination bill was introduced to the House in 1989. Holly Perdue took over the co-liaison position for Heather, Keith stayed on,

and in April of 1989, the third annual public hearing on the inclusion of sexual orientation in existing civil rights legislation took place. But again, the bill was defeated in the House.

Meanwhile the Human Rights Commission was holding hearings on hate crimes. On March 23, 1990, a hate crimes bill passed the House. In December, 1990, Ron Squires was elected to the House and became Vermont's first openly gay legislator. As the 1991 session began, once again, an anti-discrimination bill was introduced to both the House and the Senate, but because the legislature was busy with other business, no action was taken on these bills before adjournment. This marked the fifth year that the GLBTQ community was working for passage of such a bill.

I came out as a gay man in the fall of 1991, but I'm ashamed to say I was oblivious to all of the gay rights activity of that time. In December, 1991, on another course outside of Montpelier, in Addison County Probate Court, Judge Chester Ketchum approved the first gay/lesbian second parent adoption in the state and one of the first in the country. Back in Montpelier on February 27, 1992, several hundred gay community supporters gathered for yet another public hearing on the civil rights bill. Finally, no doubt after our co-liaisons had spent many hours in conversation with legislators, in May, 1992, a momentous headline ran in *OITM*: "IT PASSED!" "This is the first time in my 38 years I feel like a real citizen," said Keith Goslant of the accomplishment. The law took effect on July 1, 1992.

In 1993, the courts heard and upheld cases on second-parent adoption for same gender cou-



Keith Goslant, right, has been on the frontlines of the fight for equal rights for the GLBT community for years. He's pictured here at the 1992 public hearing on the gay rights bill.

ples, and coincidentally, the legislature took up a comprehensive rewrite of the state's adoption laws. Susan Aranoff took over for Holly as co-liaison, while Keith stayed on. The co-liaisons and other volunteers for the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights successfully lobbied for same-gender couples to be included in the adoption reform. After more public hearings and more conversations, the bill was passed into law in 1996.

And in 1994, Tom Fleury, serving as an openly gay legislator from Burlington, worked to pass the Harassment in Education bill. The bill, which passed in one session due to the testimony of youth from Outright Vermont, gives clear protection for queer youth in school. WHEW!

That, in the smallest nutshell I can get it into, is a brief overview of the civil rights gains our community has made in the last fourteen years. I say this is amazing because I have some understanding of how much work fighting for equal rights is.

That so much has been done by so many people – and in some cases so few people – truly amazes me. That so many community activists wrote letter after letter, went to hearing after hearing, and had quiet and

sometimes loud conversations with their friends, neighbors, and representatives in Montpelier amazes me.

That in the face of virulent hatred so many people have stood firmly and tirelessly for the truth for so long amazes me. That so many non-gay Vermonters have had the courage to stand by our side and fight with us for justice amazes me. That we march on, not always in lockstep, but together more often than not amazes me.

That Bill Lippert testified at the hearings for the civil rights bill in the early '90s, and that he's now serving as an openly gay legislator on the House Judiciary Committee and hearing testimony amazes me.

Perhaps most of all, I'm amazed by how many times the phrase "and Keith stayed on" appears in the paragraphs above. That Keith Goslant has been regularly volunteering in Montpelier fighting for complete equality for all GLBTQ Vermonters since 1987 amazes me. (And he never looks any older!)

As I comprehend all that has been done and continues to be done on my behalf to improve my world and my place in it, I'm overcome with gratitude. ▼

Joseph F. Watson lives in Leicester, VT.

The Condo Guy Introduces...

If you are thinking about selling your condo and buying a single-family home OR if you are thinking about selling your single family home and buying a condo, we're the team to do it.



Bill Desautels
RE/MAX North Professionals
802-655-3333 X17
800-639-4520 X17



The Single Family/ Condo Connection

Louanne Nielsen, one of the leading real estate agents in Chittenden County, has joined The Condo Guy Team. When you work with our team, you get the best of both worlds!



Louanne Nielsen
RE/MAX North Professionals
802-655-3333 X30
800-639-4520 X30

Choice financial services

Donna Lescoc

802-453-6677
fax 802-453-6685
dlescoe@together.net
PO Box 42
42 Trillium Lane
Starksboro, VT 05487



Investment Advisor Representative
of, and securities offered through
Tower Square Securities, Inc.*
Member NASD/SIPC
*Not affiliated with Choice Financial Services



JACQUELINE MARINO
Senior Associate
REALTOR®

(802) 878-0095 EXT 23 BUS., (802) 878-6288 FAX
(800) 488-5609 TOLL FREE
jackie@together.net E-MAIL

COLDWELL BANKER



REALTY MART
288 WILLISTON RD
WILLISTON, VT 05495

Each Office Is Independently
Owned And Operated.