

news

# Dean on Civil Unions: The OITM Interview

BY PAUL OLSEN

MONTPELIER — Three weeks after signing landmark legislation making Vermont the only state to provide marriage-related benefits to gay and lesbian couples, Gov. Howard Dean was interviewed by *Out in the Mountains*. During the interview, Dean discussed the state's rancorous gay marriage debate, his decision to sign the bill in private, his support for the landmark legislation, and his November reelection campaign.

Dean, a Democrat, has served as Governor since 1991. Prior to succeeding Gov. Richard Snelling, who died unexpectedly in office, Dean served as Lieutenant Governor and represented Burlington in the Vermont House of Representatives. Dean, a physician, is married to Dr. Judith Steinberg, and has two children.

As Governor, Dean has historically sided with Vermont's gay and lesbian community. He is credited with helping pass, and ultimately signing into law, legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. He also supported the extension of benefits to the domestic partners of Vermont State employees. In 1994, Dean appointed Bill Lippert, an openly gay man, to fill a vacant seat in the House of Representatives. As a result of the state's new civil union law, national gay news-magazine *The Advocate* recently dubbed him the "Dean of unions."

**OITM:** Immediately after the Supreme Court's Baker ruling, you sided with domestic partnership legislation. How did you come to make

this decision and what role do you think your position played in the ultimate outcome of the debate?

**Dean:** I knew that marriage was impossible and that the legislature would just kill themselves. They couldn't do it; they'd fall into terrible disarray. I thought the court decision left civil union as a legal alternative, which would grant the rights and the benefits, as they required. I thought that in time Vermonters would come to accept that. In the end, I think my position gave cover to a lot of people in the legislature. It really helped legislators who were struggling with the issue.

**OITM:** When you finally announced your position, you said that gay marriage made you "uncomfortable like everyone else." Can you clarify what you meant by that and specifically what about gay marriage makes you uncomfortable?

**Dean:** The truth is that it is the politics that made me uncomfortable. (Personally) I'm sure that I have the same hang-ups that lots of people have on the issue. But it is a matter of equity. I remain convinced that of the 50 percent of people who are opposed to this, that half of those are fundamentally decent human beings and this is just a vast change for them that they've never considered before. I consider those people people who will ultimately accept the equality of gays and lesbians and stop marginalizing them. Those are the people that I have to speak to.

**OITM:** At times, you have indicated that your children have provided you with wisdom and insight into some issues. Have you discussed gay marriage with your children and how have they influ-

enced your thinking?

**Dean:** They didn't influence my decision in any way, because obviously I made a decision before we had a chance to discuss it. I made my decision one-hour after I found out what the court had said. I'd done a lot of thinking about it before. I wasn't prepared for the court decision. I actually thought they were going to recommend gay marriage. But I have had frank discussions in the family about it. My conclusion is that young people are much more open-minded about this subject than people my age or people older than I am. They don't struggle with the issue. There's a tremendous amount of open-mindedness about gay and lesbian issues in the younger generation.

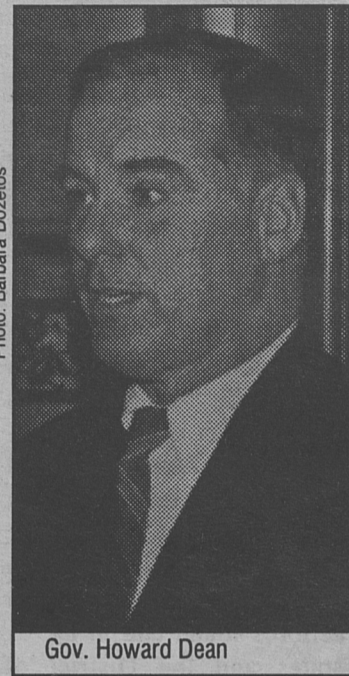
**OITM:** Supporters and opponents of the civil union legislation criticized your decision to sign the bill in private. How did you come to make this decision?

**Dean:** The state was so divided and there was so much hatred. The majority wanted us to do one thing and the legislature did something else. I had said a long time ago that I was not going to do anything that was going to be "in your face." The trouble with signing ceremonies is that sometimes they turn into we won and they didn't. I don't want to make that happen. We do really need to fundamentally bring the state back together again. We need to become one community. It doesn't do anyone any good to have further divisions in the state. Had I to do all over again I would have signed it publicly (in front of cameras) but not had a signing ceremony.

**OITM:** How would you characterize the behavior of Vermont's gay and lesbian

community during the gay marriage debate?

**Dean:** Outstanding. First



Gov. Howard Dean

of all the plaintiffs were just the right plaintiffs. When I first met with (attorneys) Beth (Robinson) and Susan (Murray) and I was talking about their civil rights in a painfully political way, they weren't getting defensive. That's a very difficult conversation to have. They never took the position that it is my way or the highway.

The second thing is the decision they made early on not to bring in outside people.


That was an incredibly smart decision. The Vermonters who didn't want this bill never had a chance because their message was being overwhelmed by the hate message from Randall Terry. I think that helped the bill enormously. The perception of out-of-state groups coming in and telling us what to do really has an effect on the legislature. Legislators don't like to be told what to do.

The third thing is that the gay and lesbian community has consistently been grateful. Usually in politics you struggle to do something for somebody, and the people who are helped by it quickly assimilate into their normal life and they forget about it. I was deeply touched by how many people came up to me to shake my hand and thank me. I was overwhelmed and really touched by how grateful people really are.

**OITM:** Some opponents of civil unions linked state funding for Outright Vermont to a larger "gay agenda." How do you respond to this charge?

**Dean:** It is nonsense. This is politically motivated

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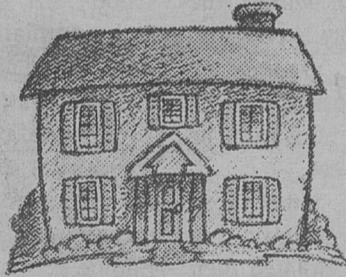




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