

## Expo New Feature at Youth Pride

BY CAROLYN ASHBY

On Saturday, May 13, the Third Annual Youth Pride sponsored by Outright Vermont included a new event: a Health and Wellness Expo. Organized by the Youth Planning Committee, a core group of youth, Outright Americorps VISTA member Mike Bense, and Spectrum POW Jamie Cohn, the Expo brought together a wide variety of GLBTQA organizations and several educational institutions to talk with youth and with each other.

Cohn explained that the group "wanted to get a whole bunch of organizations together to network and make their resources more visible." All organizations represented were invited by the Planning Committee personally or through Outright staff. Vermont CARES, RU12? Community Center, BiNet, Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force, the Samara Foundation, and Mountain Pride Media joined Outright to provide a taste of the resources available to GLBTQA youth and adults in the community. Educational information was available from Community College of Vermont, University of Vermont, and St. Michael's College. Americorps VISTA and O'Brien's Training Center added depth to the offerings for youth considering their next step after high school. Women Helping Battered Women and the Women's Rape Crisis Center attended as well, and the Peace & Justice Center had a table of rainbow wares.

Planning Committee member Cedar added that they "also wanted to have spaces set up for groups to do workshops," which turned out to be too much logistically for this start-up year. "Maybe with more time it will become a much larger event," Cedar said.

Youth turnout was not as high for the Expo as it turned out to be for the Speakout and Dance events associated with Youth Pride, but Tage Lilja, outgoing Direct Services Coordinator for Outright, felt that "if one young person connects with an organization, then this [the Expo] has been a success."

Judging from the crowd

that gathered at the Vermont CARES table to sift through flavored condoms and watch a female condom demonstration, both youth and adults were getting connected. Carroll Barrett, a nurse at Mascoma Valley High School in Canaan, NH, called Outright looking for suggestions about a field trip to Burlington with some students in a newly formed Gay/Straight Alliance. She spent the afternoon gathering print resources and talking with volunteers and staff; her students checked out resources and connected with old and new friends in the Burlington area.

The need for the Expo and the community resources offered was amply demonstrated in the many experiences shared during the Speakout. Many youth shared poetry in addition to stories of coming out, oppression, and the power of being who you are. Moderator Matt Stickney opened the Speakout by spotlighting civil unions. "In creating 'civil unions' to extend all the legal rights and responsibilities of marriage to same-sex couples," said Stickney, "Vermont lawmakers made their state the first to heartily embrace gays and lesbians." Even so, recognition and affirmation are often hard to come by, especially for GLBTQA youth.

When Danielle came out to herself, she was pretty excited. But when she came out to her parents several months ago, "they weren't that excited." Then she started getting harassing notes at school, was forced to quit the track team, and got beaten up. Crystal came out at 13, was disowned by her parents, flirted with drugs and suicide. "What got me through was my friends. I'm really glad Outright has been here, that there's places for youth to go, to meet other people," she said. Another speaker demonstrated that it's not just gay youth affected by barriers thrown in our way by homophobia; Stacy, whose good friend has two moms, said, "It felt really horrible that she couldn't tell me."

When Jay Schuster attended Essex High School "it was clear it wasn't a good place to be out; there was one guy

who was really out, and he got harassed so much" he quit school. Though the school atmosphere was less than supportive, when Jay came out to his mother, "she figured that couldn't be a bad thing," having seen how happy and full of energy he had become while falling in love for the first time.

Many adults are doing their best to help today's youth to have that kind of experience. Although she said she didn't come out at school last year because she was afraid, one of school nurse Carroll Barrett's personal goals is "to establish a GSA so that kids feel comfortable coming out, being who they are."

She encouraged teens "to be as out as you can be. Be supportive of each other. Stick together and speak out." Everyone in high school "is looking for that one person to touch them, to hold them, to tell them it's okay," said Matt. "If you can be that one person, that one voice, you can touch a million people."

The 25 plus youth and 15 or so adults who attended the Speakout on the steps of Burlington City Hall and then marched up Church Street and back down South Winooski shared their comfort and pride with the folks on the Marketplace and the drivers following slowly behind them. Rainbow flags flying, voices raised in chants, the group walked resolutely in support of each other and of GLBTQA youth everywhere.

One youth named Calin summed up the difficulties of the past and present and pointed toward the future: "The truth of the matter is as queer youth we're more likely to smoke, to do drugs. One-third of us are thrown out of our homes. Because of our willingness to be out, we've begun to set an example. Vermont has begun to set an example. We have the power to start changing things; we already are. Remember your history, how there are struggles ahead, but we're together enough to get through it."▼



Photo: Barbara Dozetos

Amanda Fernandes of Enfield, NH travelled to Burlington to attend the Youth Pride activities and visit with her friend Matthew Stickney (right).



Photo: Max Shroud

More than forty people marched in support of GLBTQA youth through the streets of downtown Burlington.

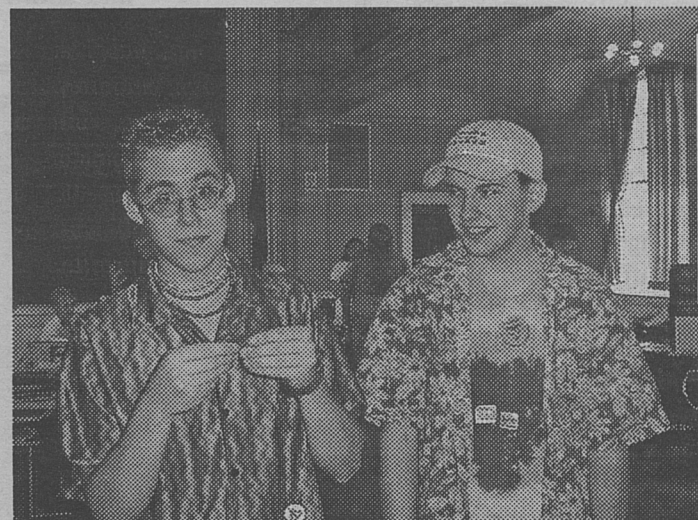


Photo: Barbara Dozetos

Adam Parmenter (left) from Hartford and Mike Arnold, of Enfield, NH spent the afternoon checking out the exhibits at the Expo.