

6-30-1996

Resist Newsletter, June 1996

Resist

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/resistnewsletter>

Recommended Citation

Resist, "Resist Newsletter, June 1996" (1996). *Resist Newsletters*. 283.
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/resistnewsletter/283>

Funding social change since 1967

RESIST

ISSN 0897-2613 • Vol. 5 #5

A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority

June 1996

Rural Queer Activism on the Frontier

Allies Working for Gay Rights

CHRISTINE KAUFMANN

Montana is a big, rural state, rapidly becoming known as a haven for angry white guys with guns and nutty politics. It's not a state where you might expect to find much gay and lesbian organizing. But in fact, a small but strong lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and committed allies have made headway for gay rights over the past few years, sponsoring public events and demanding equal rights.

This flurry of visibility didn't come out of nowhere. The activism wasn't spontaneous. It came out of a tradition of progressive movements in Montana and was, in fact, planned and organized by political activists from the women's, human rights, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities.

Between extremists

The so-called patriot movement arising from white supremacist organizing, most notably the militia and freemen, play to anti-government sentiment, gun rights, and private property rights as they recruit in Montana's communities. The same groups also target gay men and lesbians. Claiming theological justification

continued on page six

PRIDE! Under the Big Sky

SANDY HALE

The weather, the rugged terrain, the diverse political make up, and the challenges of a frontier home, have brought some unique challenges and rich rewards for the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community in Montana. Let me share the struggle and glory in organizing with PRIDE!, Montana's lesbian, gay, and bisexual activist organization.

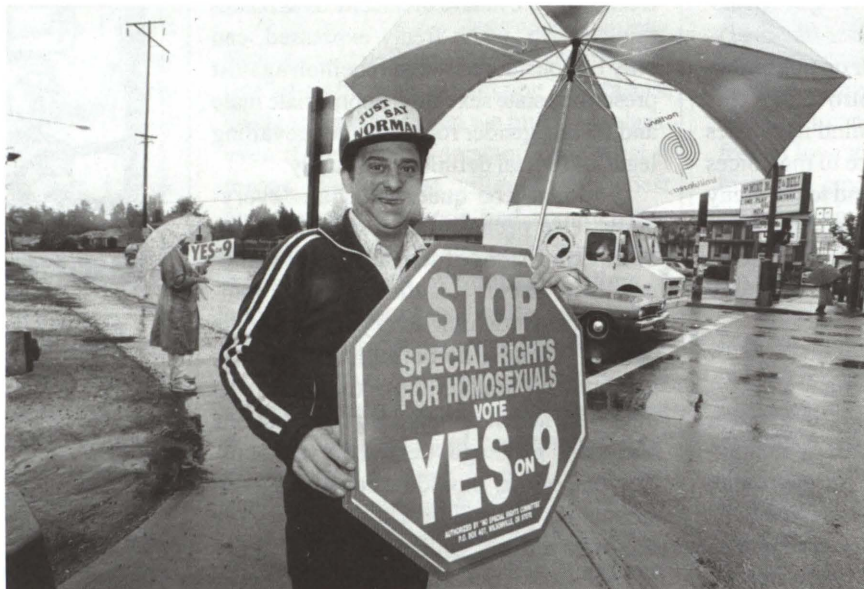
Overcoming isolation

Due to the "frontier" nature of the state and one of the stiffest state laws in the nation prohibiting homosexual contact, many gays, lesbians, and bisexuals remain invisible and separated from each other. Isolation enabled by vast distances between cities and the sparse population of the state poses a major obstacle to organizing the gay and lesbian community. It is not unusual to drive two to four hours to attend a dance, let alone

something political. A lesbian or gay man living in the far northwest corner of the state may perceive her or himself as the only lesbian or gay in the town, and they may be.

The isolation is also played out in the high suicide rate which

continued on page eight



Anti-gay ballot initiatives like Oregon's Measure 9 in 1992 attract support from many rural conservatives. Photo by Donna Binder, Impact Visuals

Reclaiming the Left:

Struggling for the Soul of the Queer Community

This article is part of a series which Resist is sponsoring throughout 1996, focusing on the meaning, significance and direction of the "Left" in the United States. This discussion in the Newsletter endeavors to foster creative, productive discourse about the direction and relevance of the Left today, as well as to examine various organizing strategies for social change. We invite responses and letters to the editor on this series.

CARMEN VAZQUEZ

I have always believed, with all my heart, that social justice work must speak to the spirit of humanity, to the yearning for freedom that I believe is a universal human

I think "everybody" in gay speak is meant to have us believe that we will be free if we just act "normal," if we can prove to the abstract "everybody" that is America that we are just the same as they are. But the white and middle class character of this

"Everybody" in gay speak is meant to have us believe that we will be free if we just act "normal."

desire. In this moment of right wing political ascendancy, I am profoundly saddened by the barrenness of spirit, by the emptiness of "gay speak." Among the most repeated and nonsensical of the "gay speak" jargon I hear is the *we-are-just-like-everybody-else* sound bite popular on talk shows and at the first hint of controversy. This jargon (and the thinking behind it) refuses to listen to and give credence to the voices within our own movement and to the many people outside the queer movement whose experience might give us reason to understand the feeling of being treated as though you had no soul.

Queers are not everybody else

What does it mean to say that queer people are like everyone else? Which everybody? The "everybody" in gay speak is actually a scene from a Norman Rockwell painting. Gay folks who want to be part of the "everybody" desperately claim that we are not messy, not poor, not addicted, not shot through our hearts or brains by random gunfire, not promiscuous or "obsessed by sex," not into leather or roles of any kind, not making a living with our bodies, not traveling on Greyhound buses to the underbellies of American cities or to dusty towns.

paradigm will not work. The middle and upper class distortions that are the requisite public image of the modern lesbian and gay movement preclude any genuine reflection on the nature of queerness as something which, when freely expressed, can only be considered social rebellion against prescribed state sexuality, appropriate male and female gender roles and the prevailing legal and social definition of family.

You can't be queer and like "everybody" else because heterosexuality is to other expressions of sexuality what whiteness is to "race." It is the normative standard against which everything else is "other," needing no definition of its own and conveying upon those that adhere to the heterosexual standard legal protections and social privileges denied the rest of us.

None of this should be construed as an assault on the middle class, America or things American. Unlike some new or old Republicans, I actually believe in the constitution. I hold out for the promise, still to be realized, of equality and freedom for all people living in this land. I do not, however, believe people of color or lesbians and gay men can attain equality in this country without radical change in the values, family definitions and economic systems we live under.

My detractors would say we have achieved those changes. They would be lying or ignoring history. With the significant exception of the constitutional amendments that enfranchised Black men, and later women, there have been no radical and sustained changes in the values, family definitions and economic systems of the United States since the end of slavery.

Liberation, class, and the queer left

I haven't ever believed that we could leapfrog from the anonymity of the "love that dared not speak its name" or the pathologizing of homosexuality or the legal statutes that criminalize our love and desire without legal strategies and cultural adaptations. These make it possible for us to be heard and seen by people who have been well trained in how to loathe and fear us.

Seeking common ground is a tactical necessity in the struggle for civil rights and it would be foolish to argue against it. Rather, I have tried to argue that those tactical and strategic efforts alone would not be sufficient to undo the fundamental character of heterosexism and racism and sex-



ILLEGITIMATE AUTHORITY
Funding social change since 1967

For information and grant guidelines,
write to: RESIST, One Summer St.,
Somerville, MA 02143

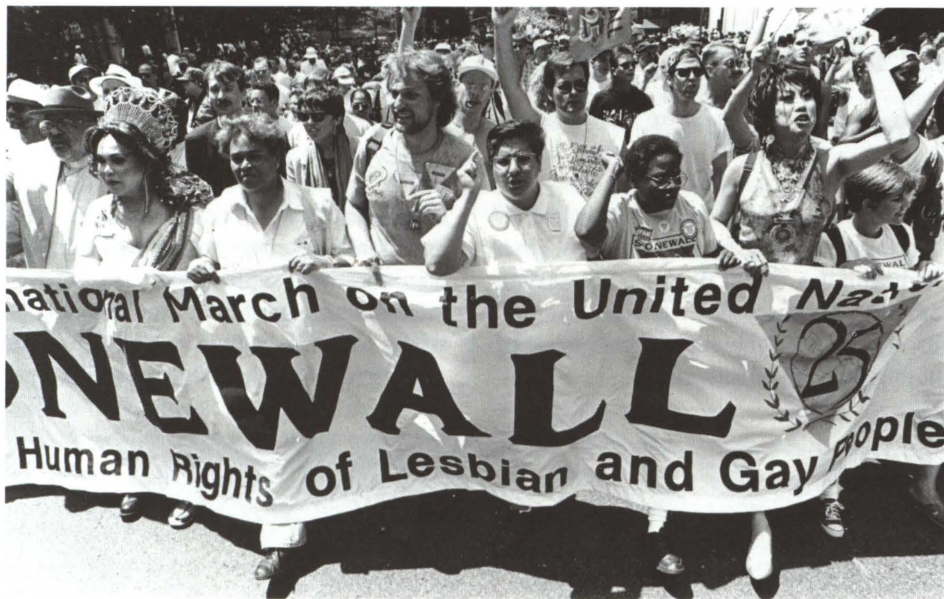
Resist Newsletter is published ten times a year by RESIST, Inc., One Summer Street, Somerville, MA 02143 (617)623-5110. The views expressed in articles, other than editorials, are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the RESIST staff or board.

RESIST Staff: Robin Carton
Carol Schachet

Newsletter Editor: Carol Schachet
Printing: Red Sun Press

Printed on Recycled Paper





Demonstrators fill the streets of New York City during the Stonewall 25/Gay Pride March in 1994. Photo by Marilyn Humphries, Impact Visuals

ism in our society. I have tried to argue that the racism, sexism and lack of class analysis internal to our movement leave us ill-prepared to defend ourselves against the erosion of whatever civil rights we may have carved out for ourselves when the eventual backlash comes.

Well, the backlash is here in all its fury and, for the most part, mainstream queers still think I'm a coo-coo lefty who just doesn't get the "reality" of what it takes to create political change in America. I'm left to wonder: Am I really off base here? Is my language truly inaccessible or excessively left and archaic? Have I missed a crucial piece of the organizing puzzle?

All of the above could be true. I think what is most accurate is that I have missed a crucial piece of the organizing puzzle. *There is a left to the queer movement, and there is a right.* Until some of us are willing to make that distinction, our ability to cohere a progressive lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender agenda capable of working with other progressive movements in this country will be extremely limited. We need a class analysis that can illuminate the role and persistence of heterosexuality in western advanced capitalist culture, and the emergence of homosexual identity, culture and community as a logical response to the changing exegeses of the family.

An understanding of class and class privilege and its relationship to any system of oppression is the only bridge we queers have to build on in our efforts to form relationships of solidarity and respect

with other oppressed people. Drop the class piece and we have no basis for understanding the wedge between us and communities of color created by the right wing; we have no basis for understanding the welfare war or the immigrant war or the teenage pregnancy war or the reproductive rights war or the war against us. And, by and large, we have dropped the class piece.

Strategies and tactics

If we are to have a queer left organizing strategy that will succeed in stemming the tide of right wing organizing and fascist white supremacy, then we must talk class, even if we don't understand fully what it means. We must be willing to be honest and sometimes tongue-tied about sexual matters, just like the rest of the population we want to reach. We must be willing to accept and honor that "white" people and people of color, straight and gay, don't talk the same language even if we're walking the same path. We must understand that the long term goals of progressive organizing don't exclude electoral and legal strategies. They just don't end there.

In a society that exalts enforced heterosexuality, queer liberation is not possible without a prolonged cultural struggle (in educational systems, media and the arts). Queer liberation demands change in the value assigned to "traditional" male and female roles, and veivs sex as something human beings engage in for pleasure and spiritual communion rather than for procreation only. In a society that values eco-

nomic profit above individual and communal needs, a queer "mainstreaming" strategy leaves those of us who happen to be female, of color, working class or poor knocking on the door of freedom.

We need a broader audience for liberation than that which nods comfortably to "virtually normal" sentiments. The dialogues and political alliances we need to engage in are with other people who know what it is to have their lives threatened and their livelihood denied because of who they are. Those are struggles for dignity and hope, for the right to choose where we live and whom we love, for the right to choose work commensurate with our capacities—not our color or our gender or our sexual orientation or our bank account. The fact that who we are is ultimately tied to our erotic desire for people of our own gender changes none of the circumstances or experiences of bigotry.

My full participation in a democratic society should not require that I wear a dress, act white, have sex with a man. Nor should I be required to remain mute in the face of the obscene redistribution of wealth upwards that is leaving one American working class community after another feeling hopeless, alienated and furious. But, in fact, such are the requirements for accommodation and success if you are female in America. I have no use for an accommodation requiring me to jettison the spirit and passion of my ancestors or the liberation of spirit I can only experience when I am free to love and desire as I choose. A lesbian and gay movement strategically focused on assimilation into the status quo leaves huge pieces of my soul in prison. It isn't enough.

The challenge of realizing liberation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people requires that we look beyond the next election. It is a challenge to transform ourselves and our society, to claim our passion as our spirit, to reclaim the left, and in the process, reclaim our souls.

Carmen Vazquez is director of public policy at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York. This essay will appear in Queerly Classed, an anthology on class and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement, edited by Susan Raffo to be published by South End Press later this year.

Confronting Homophobia in Oregon:

Activism and the Rural Organizing Project

RACHEL EBORA,
KELLEY WEIGEL, AND
MARCY WESTERLING

In 1992, the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), a radical religious right organization, introduced a ballot initiative that sought to deny gays, lesbians and bisexuals their civil rights. Through Measure 9, the OCA succeeded in spreading a message of hatred and divisiveness in Oregon. But they also unwittingly inspired the formation of a flourishing civil rights activist movement across the rural areas of the state. Faced with the challenges that rural life can pose to people who are different, many gay, lesbian and bisexual activists came out of the woodwork to become catalysts for progressive social change work in their own communities.

Four years later, many of these same activists continue to work together in an alliance that is at the forefront of progressive, multi-issue organizing in rural, small town and frontier Oregon: the Rural Organizing Project (ROP).

Human dignity organizing

The ROP formed in 1993 to support the analysis and forward movement of local activists as they countered the religious right in their communities. Founded out of one rural community's response to the OCA's reign of electoral terror, the ROP grew beyond that community's borders, helping communities throughout Oregon form human dignity groups.

"Human dignity organizing" (as it came to be called) did not focus exclusively on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, but instead sought to bring together people who cared about a core set of values, such as democracy, inclusivity, and equality. However, because the religious right recruited much of its base through an aggressively anti-gay platform, the ROP needed to concentrate on including and supporting those under attack by Measure 9.

To do so, the ROP developed an organizational plan that acknowledged the unique challenges that being queer and an out activist present in rural settings. As a result, ROP's core leaders were (and are)

queer. Ninety percent of the ROP's leadership team identify as sexual minorities. From its beginning, the ROP chose not only to advocate for queer civil rights but to "out" itself in an anti-gay climate in defense of human and civil rights.

than in actuality. Gay men and lesbians came out as active contributors to their local communities and those contributions were valued more than homophobia. Queer activists also found that the base they had created for a political need served as a per-



The Rural Organizing Project formed to confront homophobic organizing, like the Oregon Citizens' Alliance attempt to ban gay rights laws. Measure 9 was defeated, as was a similar measure introduced in 1994. Photo by Donna Binder, Impact Visuals

Nowhere to hide

Many challenges and obstacles make organizing for queer rights in rural areas vastly different and often more difficult than doing similar work in urban settings. For example, the anonymity prevalent in urban life rarely exists in rural communities. If you write a letter to the newspaper in a small town, everyone knows who you are. It can be very intimidating, especially if you're taking a stand on something like a homophobic ballot measure. People are silenced and are afraid—sometimes with good reason—to speak their minds.

Due to the size and isolation of these communities, a disgruntled landlord, employer or social circle can not be easily replaced. If you come out in a rural community, you are out and stuck with the consequences. Many queer activists discovered that the risk was more daunting in theory

personal security net. There now was a body of people prepared to challenge the homophobia that might emerge as a result of being out.

In conjunction with anonymity, personal risks are heightened by the isolation of rural gay, lesbian and bisexual activists. "During Measure 9 many gays here stayed in the closet because they were so frightened of coming out. It can be very dangerous for gays in rural areas," says Harry Viar, gay chair of the Coos County Coalition for Human Rights and member of the ROP Board of Directors. The year that Measure 9 was introduced, homes and cars of people perceived to be gay or lesbian had rocks thrown at them, and letters calling gays a "threat to society" were printed in the local newspaper.

From a fledgling effort of several human dignity groups to a network of more

than 60 human dignity groups throughout rural and frontier Oregon, the ROP's model for organizing and progressive coalition building has positively affected work in rural areas in the neighboring states of Washington, Idaho and Wyoming. "The ROP gives activists assistance, from organizing a new group in town, to clarifying visions and goals, to developing long-range plans for existing groups, to networking. The ROP also breaks down the isolation that many rural activists feel, by helping them create structures so that they feel supported in their work," summarized Natalie Shapiro, an Idaho rural activist that has worked with groups such as the Lesbian Avengers and the Idaho Rural Outreach Network for Gays and Lesbians (IRONGAL).

"I think what is happening in Oregon is of historic magnitude. We are pulling together to create positive change in our communities like never before," states Elli Work, lesbian chair of the Deschutes County Coalition for Human Dignity, member of the ROP Board of Directors and currently running for a seat in the Oregon legislature.

Since the ROP's emergence in 1993, queer organizing in rural Oregon has produced many personal gains for gays and lesbians across the state. For many, the decision to be out and active in speaking the truth about their lives and the lives of other traditionally oppressed groups has been an enriching experience. A few have lost jobs, most have lost friends and relationships with family, some have been

threatened, and others murdered. In the words of Michelle Abdill, murdered on December 4th, 1995 with her lover of 12 years Roxanne Ellis: "It is a fearful thing to face rejection, but it is more frightening to be an empty dishonest person, always relying on the approval of others for one's own sense of self. If we're lucky, we will come to know the gifts we've been given and we'll learn to play the music of honesty that is in our hearts."

Rachel Ebor, Kelley Weigel and Marcy Westerling work for the Rural Organizing Project. The ROP received a Resist grant in 1995. For more information, contact the ROP, Box 1350, Scappoose, OR 97056.

Mainstreaming Queer Liberation:

A Review of Urvashi Vaid's Virtual Equality

Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation*. Anchor/Doubleday (October, 1995). This review is excerpted with permission from *Gay Community News* (Vol. 21 #2), 29 Stanhope Street, Boston, MA 02116.

SARA MILES

By temperament, ideology, and practice I'm a leftist—which means I've had my heart broken again and again, so that cynicism and exhaustion are lodged in the scars, side by side with an unstoppable, idiotically resurgent faith. It also means I'm hypercritical: since my own failings are the subtext of all the irritation the left inspires in me, its tics drive me crazy with waves of familial frustration and love.

You, too? Let's talk. Let's talk with Urvashi Vaid, leftist, former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) head, who's addressing us in her new book, *Virtual Equality*, even as she lobs large chunks of prose toward potentially sympathetic straight people, mainstream gay liberals, and the uncommitted, apolitical queer masses. Think of this book as a meeting you have to go to. The speaker has important things to tell us, even though the audience is unfocused, there are too many items on the agenda, and we've been over and over this

ground until we think we'll scream if we have to sit here ten more minutes on these crummy folding chairs.

Virtual Equality is about its brilliant subtitle—"the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian liberation"—and the book, like the left, fills me with both impatience and

she says, is the only way to achieve real freedom and escape the limits of conditional, "virtual" equality. And, although she offers a basic gay and lesbian political agenda for full civil equality, she also insists on the importance of expressing a queer culture, unapologetically

A return to principles of gay liberation is the only way to achieve real freedom and escape the limits of "virtual" equality.

respect. Like our movement, the book is repetitive, inconclusive, stuck in the past; also like the movement, it is full of courage and sweetness, history and hope. *Virtual Equality* is very much a mirror of where we are now.

The long-awaited work ("I bet she's going to tell *everything!*" a political friend gossiped last year, breathless with anticipation) starts strong. Vaid stakes out her position quickly, claiming that "mainstreaming," or a traditional civil-rights strategy of integration and assimilation, has failed as much as it has accomplished for lesbian and gay people. A return to principles of gay liberation,

sexual, which "embodies values more radical than the political movement that defends it."

Vaid's strongest criticisms of mainstreaming come from her up-close observations of groups like the NGLTF and the Human Rights Campaign Fund, and of the network of gay major donors whose politics and interests have come to dominate Washington-based discourse on gay rights. In a series of revealing anecdotes, Vaid exposes battles over how the movement should relate to Clinton's administration and, more broadly, to Congress. She discusses the

continued on page seven

continued from page one

for their hatred of homosexuals, these groups found currency in rural communities which allowed them significant recruiting opportunities.

Activists concerned about the increasing presence of white supremacists in their communities formed the Montana Human Rights Network 1990. This state-wide network of local groups helps activists access information and confront hate and bigotry more effectively.

To lessen the impact of supremacist recruitment, the Network began supporting public policy changes that would provide legal protection for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Under the rubric of human rights, we began to engage in public education on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues around legislative hearings and every time we were invited to speak about hate groups or the right wing. We began to support gay-positive events and call on communities to embrace their lesbian, gay, and bisexual members and make a safe place for them.

When we did this, we came face-to-face with a new opponent—the religious and political right.

Among our natural allies, we sometimes have to fight to keep gay rights issues on the agenda. It's too easy for otherwise fair-minded folks to say, "We're with you on gay rights, but don't make us talk about it

pageant biases, and asked how she felt about gay rights. Before the Miss America pageant, Amanda Granrud had done a television public service announcement to counter right-wing extremism, she had spo-

The only way to win on gay rights in a rural state is to keep our progressive allies thinking about the issue.

or vote on it. It might hurt our credibility. We might not get reelected."

The only way to win on gay rights in a rural state is to keep progressive allies thinking about the issue and responding to it in public forums. The lesbian, gay, and bisexual community just isn't big enough to do this work alone. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are too isolated from each other and often too closeted in the face of homophobia to carry the battle without the work of progressive allies. By reminding

ken amid hecklers at the state's gay pride march and rally, and she had done an interview with *The Advocate* on why it was important to speak up for gay rights even though her sponsors didn't like it.

Pushing public policy

Perhaps the most significant role the Network has played in lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues is in the public policy arena. For the past two legislative sessions we have been a leader in coalition efforts to repeal the state's "deviate sexual conduct law." The law is one of the most severe and discriminatory in the nation, allowing a felony sentence of 10 years and \$50,000 for any same-sex sexual contact. We are now supporting the constitutional challenge to that law, which is in front of the state supreme court and is expected to be heard this fall.

The past two legislative sessions we have urged the progressive coalition along on efforts to secure full civil rights for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. The right to be free from discrimination in housing, on the job, in public accommodation, and when securing government services, including the right to legal recourse when discrimination occurs, is always a part of our legislative agenda.

Redefining "winning" gay rights

In the 1994 elections, like much of the rest of the nation, Montana took a swing to the right. Many strategists and most political leaders were saying, "This is not the right time for gay rights legislation. We can't force our friends to vote on these issues when there's no chance of winning."

No chance of winning? That depends on how you define winning. We win every

Bigotry and hatred toward racial or religious minorities doesn't sell very well in the mainstream, but unfortunately, homophobia still does.

This movement, embodied most visibly in Montana by the Christian Coalition, says they "love the sinners" while they spew out hate-filled messages indistinguishable from those of the racist right. While white supremacists called us "anti-white race traitors" and "unpatriotic," the religious right labeled us "anti-Christian" and "part of the gay agenda."

Recruiting allies

Despite the name calling by our opponents—and at times complicity from our friends—it was clear that the Network could not compromise on the basic human right to be who we are with dignity, and to be free from discrimination and harassment no matter whom we love.

our progressive allies that they are contributing to injustice when they remain silent on this issue, we bring in new voices that reach more people.

One of the advantages of organizing in rural states is that people know each other. And those same people are also sure to know progressive allies in the labor, environmental, education, and religious communities. One of the disadvantages is that there aren't that many of us. The person working for lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights, is likely the environmental activist and the women's rights activist as well. The key is to bring in new activists.

For example, when Miss Montana called and said she wanted to be involved in human rights issues, I buried my anti-beauty

time these issues become public, no matter what the vote is. We win every time legislators hear about the fear of a gay man when he was assaulted on the street, of a lesbian fired for reasons unrelated to job performance, of a gay teen who has committed suicide rather than face the homophobia.

We win every time these stories are printed in the papers. We even win when people hear the hate-filled rhetoric that characterizes the religious and political extremists. They are exposed for who they are, outed by their hatred and fears.

We win because someone is thinking about gay rights differently than before. Someone is changing. Someone is talking about gays in a new way. Someone understands that it's about equal rights for all of us. None of this happens if we keep quiet. And someday we'll win the vote in the legislature as well.

Sometimes victories are quite tangible. For instance, in 1995, at the urging of the Christian Coalition, the Montana Senate voted to require lifetime registration of lesbians and gay men convicted under the deviate sexual conduct law. The next day three press conferences were held simultaneously in three cities by outraged Montanans—church members, teachers, human rights activists, and gay men and lesbians. Calls of disbelief flooded the capitol.

Within 24 hours the vote was reversed. Gay rights activists hadn't gained any ground, but we had won a big victory. It wouldn't have happened if the issues hadn't been out there in the public debate.

While allies are critical, we cannot speak for the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. Therefore, after the 1993 legislative session, activists from the human rights and women's community began planning the formation of a gay rights organization, staffed by lesbian and gay activists. The result was PRIDE!, a state-wide resource and activist center for gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizing in Montana. The Network continues to work with PRIDE! as an ally, seeking human rights for our lesbian and gay neighbors.

Christine Kaufmann is the Research Director of the Montana Human Rights Network. The Network received a Resist grant in 1991. For more information, contact the Network, PO Box 1222, Helena, MT 59624.

continued from page five

relationship between national leadership and its actual and potential grassroots base. She offers a detailed look at the impact of money on the movement, and in a provocative analysis of electoral politics concludes that money not only corrupts democratic process but fails to achieve results. Money, she notes, buys access, but votes buy power.

Vaid is sharp about specific issues—her history of the battle over gays in the military is especially intriguing—but she returns again and again to broader issues of strategy. What should the gay and lesbian movement *do*? How should its organizations be structured? What's been the impact of AIDS on the movement, what is the impact of class, of race, of gender, what is our enemy's strategy? She explores the benefits and limitations of inside or outside approaches to lobbying; of national nonprofits with powerful boards or locally-based chapter organizations with elected officials; of white-run, centralized groups or autonomous but poorly-funded organizations of people of color. Through it all, she takes a consistent position on structuring the movement to allow direct democracy and feminist process; she also argues that the movement's line should favor coalition-building rather than single-issue work, anti-racist practice, and a "progressive" economic analysis that can build a cross-class, cross-gender base.

Unfortunately, Vaid is nearly 300 pages into her book on the gay and lesbian movement before, in a section on identity politics, she addresses the flaw at its center: "A false assumption underlies all gay and lesbian organizing: that there is something at once singular and universal that can be called gay and lesbian or bisexual or even transgendered identity." She goes on to discuss John D'Emilio's "myth of the eternal homosexual," and uses organizer Suzanne Pharr's discussion of the limits of identity politics to make a sharp criticism of much identity-based gay activism. But Vaid's entire analysis and discussion in the preceding nine chapters have been based on uncritical appeals to "our people." Even as she carefully repeats the formulas that specify diversity within that "people," she offers "gay" itself as a category needing no explanation.

Surely this has been a fundamental theoretical problem of the gay and lesbian movement, the big iceberg on which all kinds of strategic approaches could be expected, sooner or later, to crash. Its appearance in *Virtual Equality* reflects the centrality of the ongoing, unsolved contradictions around lesbian and gay identity that Vaid struggles with. As Vaid makes clear, identity-based organizing simply can't handle the multiple (and shifting) identities of most individuals. She also rejects simplistic notions of essential queerness, writing that "...on the gay left, there is a persistent tendency to apply universalities to the messy reality of gay and lesbian behavior." Accepting identity politics as "a necessary mistake," Vaid considers it briefly, then jumps ahead to consider multiculturalism and coalitions as more effective approaches to organizing the movement.

Vaid, in her eloquent chapter on coalition-building, appeals to straight people for solidarity. I share the belief that most people are basically decent and not, by nature, hate-filled sociopaths—but so does the Christian Right. If we want people to embrace our ideology, we have to spell out what it means, and not simply talk about "fairness," "decency," or "the right thing to do," as if leftism were a set of self-evident moral values. And if we want lesbian and gay people to become life-long movement activists, we have to offer them an alternative that's both personally satisfying and politically interesting.

It would make sense, as well, to look at culture more deeply. I like Vaid's assertion that queer culture is an asset in our movement for liberation. I appreciate her resistance to the mass marketing of that culture, and her understanding of how cultural "visibility" can be used to substitute for political equality. (Remembering that rock concerts failed to bring Fascist Amerikkka to its knees quite as quickly as we anticipated, I have some doubts about the revolutionary impact of lesbian visibility as expressed through the appearance of minor characters on sit-coms.) Still, I miss, in Vaid's book exactly as in the lesbian and gay political movement, the actual texture, humor, sexiness and spark of our multiple queer

continued on page nine

continued from page one

Montana and other frontier states experience. Montana has one of the highest teen suicide rates in the country, with many of these deaths attributed to youth struggling with sexual orientation issues. There is no easy access to accurate, supportive information about being gay or lesbian for Montana's youth. Even adult lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men suffer from a lack of contact with a thriving queer culture that

is present in larger metropolitan areas. In court that the law created an atmosphere that sanctioned violent and hateful acts toward the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community.

In February 1996, Judge Jeffrey Sherlock, Helena District Court, declared the statute unconstitutional, ruling that it violated Montana's constitutional provision to the right to privacy. Diane Sands, Missoula board member of PRIDE!, stated that this was a "fundamental victory. It's as fun-

under the malicious harassment law, nor does the state have a hate crimes reporting system in place. So the storm fronts continue to fill the Big Sky.

Queer projects for rural organizing

There's a saying in Montana: Snow and rain at seven, sun by eleven. Gay and lesbian activists in Montana have had our share of snow and rain. We're beginning to see a little sunshine. Since the appearance of PRIDE! on the horizon, some additional wonders have been achieved in the community.

In June 1994, in Missoula, PRIDE! hosted its first Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Pride celebration. Despite fears that no one would attend, over 400 people marched down the streets of Missoula that year. And for a state with a population of about 800,000 people, that's a phenomenal first showing! It was an event which inspired many gays and lesbians to come out of the closet and get involved. Lou Bruno, present PRIDE! board member from East Glacier, recounts, "Marching in Missoula changed my life. It was a religious experience. I didn't feel alone or afraid anymore about being gay." He then joined the PRIDE! board.

In Helena the next year close to 600 supporters showed up on the State Capitol grounds to participate in the march and

Who would step out on Main Street, Glendive, Montana, by herself, and say "I'm your lesbian real estate broker" or "I'm your gay banker"?

is present in larger metropolitan areas.

Because of this isolation, there are few incentives for an individual to be a positive role model leading the way for other gays. Who would step out on Main Street, Glendive, Montana, by herself, and say "I'm your lesbian real estate broker" or "I'm your gay banker"? Who would dare to come out in the teachers' lounge in the public schools if he felt he were the only gay teacher? That's what it feels like—all alone with miles and miles of Big Sky in front of you and not a person in sight, let alone a member of the queer community.

Gay and lesbian organizations in rural areas, such as PRIDE! in Montana, also face the organizing challenge of having a very small leadership pool with which to work. The state is geographically endless, but it seems all the progressive activists could fit in one coffee shop in Helena!

Battles in the court

In December 1993, three lesbians and three gay men filed a lawsuit against the State of Montana (Gryczan versus the State of Montana) challenging the constitutionality of the statute criminalizing sexual contact between persons of the same sex. The plaintiffs argued that the law violated an individual's right to privacy and created state-sanctioned discrimination against a class of adults based on whom they loved in private. They went on to ar-

damental as the winning of suffrage, or, to some degree, how the Emancipation Proclamation must have felt." And indeed for the gay and lesbian community throughout the Big Sky State, a cloud has been lifted. Organizing around lesbian, gay, and bisexual civil rights issues has been made a little easier, for the time being.

The fact is, Montana is just like the rest of the country. Acceptance and homophobia are both parts of the social fabric here.

Several weeks after the District Court decision, the State Attorney General's office appealed this decision to the Montana State Supreme Court with an expected ruling sometime in early 1997. Montana's Christian Coalition has threatened to introduce anti-gay legislation in 1997 if the court rules in favor of gay rights. Moreover, in spite of the court victory, gays and lesbians in Montana are still not protected from discrimination in housing or employment under the state's human rights act. Homosexuals are not protected against violence

rally. This month in Billings, with the national attention focused on the freemen and Unabomber, the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Pride events should truly prove to be a display of courage, visibility, and just plain "down home" community-building.

Telling our stories

PRIDE! is also supporting other activities which are opening the closet doors for Montana's gay, lesbian, and bisexual family. In collaboration with Helena Presents/Myrna Loy Center, a community-based

center for the arts, PRIDE! is sponsoring the Montana Gay & Lesbian Story Project. Arnie Malina, Director of Helena Presents, and Los Angeles-based director Steven Kent began a process of gathering stories from gays and lesbians in Montana. For more than three years lesbians and gays from all over the state have gathered in story circles to share their experiences.

Pride of place and pride of identity were two recurring needs of Montanans who participated in the story telling activities. These same needs cry out from the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. According to Malina, "The fact is, Montana is just like the rest of the country. Acceptance and homophobia are both parts of the social fabric here. But gays in these sparsely populated rural areas face the additional challenges of extreme isolation. And gays want to stay in Montana, want to create a home here." One of the themes that came out of the story circles is that "it's our home, too." The hundreds of hours of stories were taped and have become part of the archives of the Montana Historical Society.

Even more exciting, the stories were distilled and have become part of a theater piece that was first performed at the 1995 June Pride event in Helena. Additional performances took place in Missoula and Bozeman. Future plans include taking story telling performances to remote communities in Montana. Storytelling has been an extremely democratic strategy to get all sorts of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals involved in a coming out process and doing public education about who we really are. Through the arts, a once closeted segment of the Montana community has stepped into the light.

In a continuation of the "story circle" model, PRIDE! piloted "talking circles" in Billings, Bozeman, and Butte designed to empower lesbian, gay, and bisexuals to speak out, share their stories, voice their concerns and dreams, and provide support to each other. The lesbian, gay, and bisexual community must feel safe as it comes out in Montana. Some of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community are already politicized. But for many men and women in rural communities, finding another gay man, lesbian, or bisexual just to talk to is the initial step in organizing the queer civil rights movement in Montana.

Working with allies

Another simultaneous step to take is building acceptance and a base of advocacy with our "straight allies." PRIDE! is facilitating this by sponsoring the OutSpoken Project. OutSpoken is a half-day, interactive workshop where participants learn to answer difficult questions posed to them about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. The queer community as well as straight folks have attended these workshops. Working with the Northwest Speak Out Project (Portland, OR) in early 1995, members from PRIDE!, Montana Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and human rights groups participated in training to implement these workshops intended to "change one mind and one heart at a time."

The training model assists individuals to respond in a non-defensive manner to comments like, "I liked homosexuals better when you didn't flaunt yourselves at marches and rallies," or "I don't want lesbians and gay men teaching my children and recruiting them into their immoral lifestyle."

PRIDE!'s most recent undertaking is to build coalitions with lesbians and gay men in the Native American community. At six percent of the population, Indians comprise the largest minority in Montana. Using Native American facilitators, the areas of identity, support, safety, and health concerns will be explored with lesbian, gay, and bisexual Indians. From the findings of the focus groups, PRIDE! will work with the Indian community to figure out where to go to next.

The hope, visibility, political action, and public education that PRIDE! provides on behalf of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community in a growing climate of political extremism is critical—not only to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community but to Montanans who support social justice for all. And because of the umbrella of support PRIDE! shares with other progressive allies in its work, organizing around lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in this frontier state is not as daunting and not as lonely a challenge as once before.

Sandy Hale is the executive director of PRIDE! in Helena, Montana. For more information, contact PRIDE!, PO Box 775, Helena, MT 59624.

continued from page seven

cultures. References to "the cultural arm of the movement" are surely an Old Left relic we can dispose of; the punk dykes whose music Vaid loves would roll their eyes.

Virtual Equality plunges us into a tangle of theoretical and practical political issues that spring from the intersection between identity and movement. In a practical context, we might ask how lesbians and gays want to approach organizing—both political and cultural. Is it the *nature* of our difference (i.e., our sexuality) that we're organizing around? Or is it the idea of difference in itself—difference of whatever kind—as something intrinsically valuable to democracy, something that can roughen up the smooth edges of power?

If we make our sexuality (even our wildly plural sexualities) the point, then we wind up emphasizing sexual difference in a way that reinforces the creation of categories. We win allies, but mostly among those sexual minorities and sexually dissident individuals who already see themselves as such. If difference is the point, however, then both "identity" and "movement" can be categories subject to flux, celebrated precisely for their untamable breadth. We can find allies *because of*, not in spite of, their dissimilarities.

The embrace of difference, and flux, is perhaps the most important message of *Virtual Equality*. It makes for a book as sprawling and unresolved as the movement it mirrors, but one that excites and agitates as it raises the issues. Out of this confusing, contradictory moment in our queer history, Urvashi Vaid finds hope.

One of the simplest, strongest insights of the left is to understand that it's almost always better to do *something* than nothing. This book does lots of somethings, offering both analysis and practical organizing suggestions with vision and courage. I know you're tired. But come to the meeting anyway. It's about lesbian and gay liberation.

Sara Miles is a contributing writer for OUT magazine and an editor for the Transnational Institute's series New Thinking, a comparative study of change inside formerly armed movements in South Africa, the Philippines, and El Salvador.

GRANTS

In each issue of the Newsletter we highlight a few recent RESIST grants to groups throughout the United States. This month, we feature grants awarded at our April Board meeting. For more details about these grants, please write to the organizations directly at the addresses listed below.

Voices for Haiti

P.O. Box 29615
Washington, DC 20017

Voices for Haiti is a nationwide grassroots campaign whose mission is to demand a U.S. policy that supports democracy, human rights and economic justice in Haiti through grassroots mobilization and advocacy. Voices for Haiti was initially organized in 1994 in response to the increasing human rights violations and poor economic conditions in Haiti under the leaders of the 1991 coup. At that time, Voices for Haiti's main goal was to monitor and publicize the U.S. government's failure to act in restoring democracy to Haiti. Voices for Haiti continues to facilitate cooperation between U.S. and Haitian grassroots groups, and to monitor the U.S. political, military and economic presence in Haiti.

A Resist grant of \$770 will assist Voices for Haiti in the purchase of a new computer to publish their newsletter, *Voices for Haiti Speaking Out*, which analyzes U.S. policy in Haiti and publicizes the organizing efforts of their grassroots member groups.

Common Threads

P.O. Box 962
Venice, CA 90294

A Los Angeles-based women's group, Common Threads organizes against the rampant abuse of workers in the garment industry and supports the efforts of garment workers to unionize. Group members highlight the fashion industry's impact on the lives of all women; call for better working and living conditions for garment workers; and build community and consumer pressure to hold clothing manufacturers and retailers accountable for their actions.

Resist's grant of \$1,000 will help fund a community outreach and organizing campaign by covering the start up costs for a quarterly newsletter and the cost of reproducing their slide show entitled, "A Look at the Los Angeles Garment Industry."

Empty the Shelters- Atlanta

363 Georgia Avenue, SE
Atlanta, GA 30312

Empty the Shelters (ETS) formed on the heels of the student community service movement as young people recognized the need for solid political and economic change. In 1990, a small group of young people organized the first ETS Summer of Social Action in conjunction with the Up and Out of Poverty Now! Network in Philadelphia. ETS remains a youth-led organization engaging young people in the fight against poverty. The collective in Atlanta was founded in 1992.

Utilizing a \$1,000 grant from Resist, ETS will reproduce 5,000 copies of its handbook, *Spoilsport's Guide to the Olympics*, which takes a biting look at the effect of the Olympics on low income people in Atlanta. ETS will also hold a media training for collective members who will attempt to influence the nearly 19,000 journalists and 17 million tourists expected to visit Atlanta this summer.

Women's Cancer Resource Center

1130 Nicollet Mall
Minneapolis, MN 55403

Women's Cancer Resource Center (WCRC) formed in January, 1993, to address the failure of research projects to include issues related to women's health. Currently, WCRC mobilizes for public awareness of the environmental links which often appear as precursors to the onset of cancer, including: the presence of chlorine in the paper and pulp industry; the burning of dioxin-creating plastics in waste, hospital and hazardous waste incinerators; the use of chemicals in dry cleaning; and the widespread commercial and residential use of pesticides, among others.

With a Resist grant of \$1,000, WCRC will hire a sign language interpreter and produce promotional materials for its upcoming October conference entitled *Turning the Tides: Creating a Cancer-Free Environment Now*.

Join the RESIST Pledge Program

We'd like you to consider becoming a RESIST Pledge. Pledges account for over 25% of our income.

By becoming a pledge, you help guarantee RESIST a fixed and dependable source of income on which we can build our grant-making program. In return, we will send you a monthly pledge letter and reminder along with your newsletter. We will keep you up-to-date on the groups we have funded and the other work being done at RESIST.

So take the plunge and become a RESIST Pledge! We count on you, and the groups we fund count on us.

Yes! I'll become a RESIST Pledge.

I'll send you my pledge of \$ _____
every month/two months/
quarter/six months (circle one).

Enclosed is initial pledge contribution of \$ _____.

I can't join the pledge program now, but here's a contribution of \$ _____ to support your work.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone _____

Resist • One Summer Street • Somerville, MA 02143 • 617/623-5110