

Urvashi Vaid

Being gay is her job, and she's good at it. Vaid is the Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

by Marilyn Davis

When I press the "record" button, nothing happens. Urvashi Vaid reaches for the tape player. "Let me try to fix it," she says. "It'll give me something to do while we talk." It's 8 am on Monday morning, and Vaid has been in Oregon only a few days. During that time she has traveled from Portland to Eugene to Roseburg and back, conducting workshops, speaking at rallies, and meeting with gay and lesbian groups around the state. In an hour she'll be standing on the steps of the Multnomah County Public Library, surrounded by media microphones, delivering a speech about the nationwide significance of the Oregon Citizens Alliance's referendum. She'll try to make sure that the newspapers spell her name right. By noon she'll be on a plane, flying home to Washington, D.C., where she is the Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. She likes to do things, to fix things, and she doesn't like to waste time. As we talk she fiddles with the tape recorder, pulling out the batteries and pressing buttons.

PROFILE

Vaid is a public person. More than anything else her position at the Task Force demands that she be a totally out lesbian, all the time. Being gay is her job, and she's good at it. She is a hard-working, highly skilled, professional spokesperson for the gay and lesbian community.

"I've struggled a lot with the increasingly public persona I have become. My self identity is different from what people see. I say my reputation exceeds me. I still regard myself as a community organizer; that's what I wanted to be in school and that's what I feel I am. Suddenly (as Executive Director of NGLTF) I have enormous visibility. It may seem as though I've just popped up on the scene, but people who think that don't know me. In fact, I've worked in the gay and lesbian community for many years, and for the Task Force for the last six years. Six years. That's like 15 dog years—24 hours a day of activity, everyday. My time here in Portland is an indication of that."

At the end of the year Vaid will leave the staff



Urvashi Vaid at community leadership institute, June 6, Portland State University

of NGLTF to study, travel in India, write and live in Boston and Provincetown, Mass. She'll continue to be involved in the gay and lesbian movement as a strategist and political leader. "I'm excited about changing roles. I'll be doing more of what I've been doing in Portland this weekend, more community organizing, less institution building. That's what I'm leaving behind."

Vaid will also leave behind some political controversy. According to Rex Wockner, writing for Outlines News Service, she has been attacked by "those who feel the Task Force is overly beholden to so-called 'political correctness' and thus devotes too much energy to non-gay 'progressive' causes." Such "progressive causes" include opposition to the Gulf War, the fight for abortion rights, protests against the Rodney King verdict, and "allegedly providing preferential treatment to women and people of color in the name of battling sexism and racism."

Vaid is vehement in her response to these attacks. "I'm proud to be attacked for fighting

racism, sexism, and homophobia. I see it as a badge of honor. The attacks on me are an indication of the backlash in the lesbian and gay community against progressive politics. At the Task Force we have a spectrum of political views. We engage in hard political conversations. If we come out on the side of a progressive agenda, it doesn't mean we haven't argued about it. The fact is that all of us who are marginalized have to fight together to win. We need all parts of ourselves. That's why working against sexism and homophobia are central. Conservatives in the gay and lesbian movement see these issues as sidelines. To them they are a distraction. To me they are a necessity. A unified community is a necessity."

Vaid herself represents the multiculturalism of the gay and lesbian community. "My own background is multicultural; I was born in India and emigrated to the states when I was eight years old. So my experience is an immigrant experience. But I think the increasing multiculturalism of the gay and lesbian movement has more to do with this historical moment, than with any individual experience. Gays and lesbians of color are more out in the movement, largely I think as a result of HIV and AIDS. Gay men and women of color are disproportionately affected by HIV. AIDS organizing has created people of color institutions to deal with the crisis. In the last four or five years there are more activists of color coming into the movement from AIDS work. It's like lesbians in the late '70s, becoming more and more involved in what had been gay male institutions. It's not that sexism in gay institutions has disappeared, of course, but now it's a given that gay men and lesbians can work together."

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"Feminism has done a lot to prepare for the increasing multiculturalism of the movement. Lesbian of color writers like Barbara Smith have provided the theoretical basis. Charlotte Bunch articulated diversity politics years ago. Now in

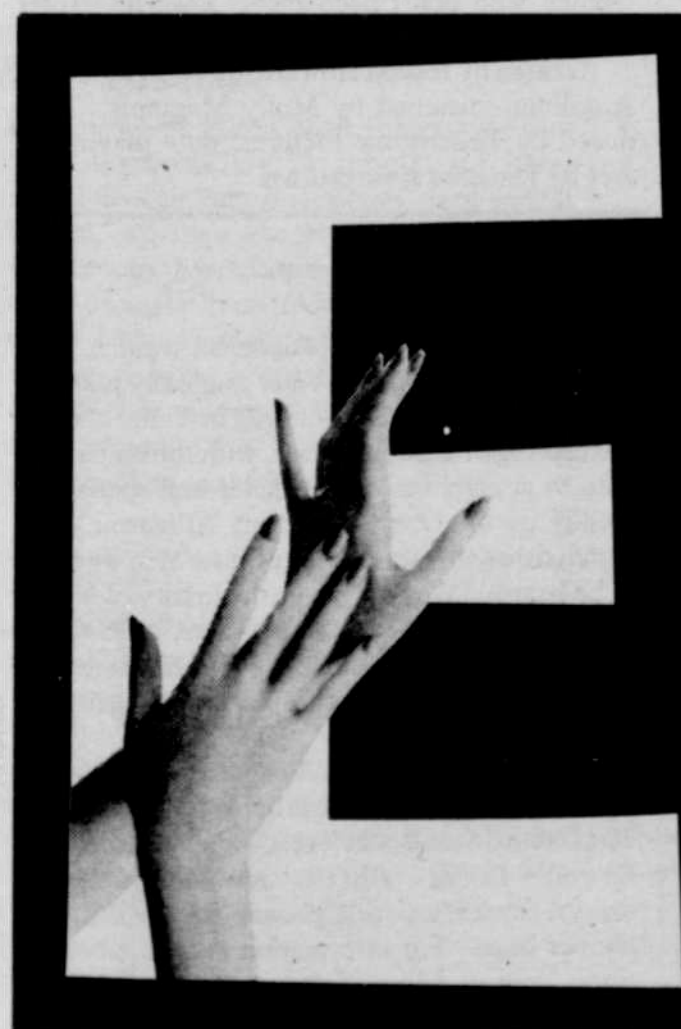
1992 comes the fruition of those ideas.

"And it's interesting that at this very instant multiculturalism is coming under ruthless attack from conservatives. The attack on 'PC' is part of this. It's conservatives attacking us for having a multicultural vision, for liking people of color! And it's completely about power. Whenever someone is trying to maintain or create divisions between people, ask *who does it benefit?* Certainly not lesbian and gay men of *all* colors. As a society we're obsessive around division, and the Right uses that as a wedge to divide people. We are a diverse community in every possible way—there's even sexual preference diversity in the gay and lesbian community. But we have to say, yeah we're diverse, but we're united around these objectives. That's the only way we can win."

Vaid believes the fight here in Oregon against the OCA referendum is an important part of the fight on a national level against cultural fascism, the "bullies picking on a whole society, trying to impose their view of morality on all of us."

She was encouraged during her visit here by the number of gay and lesbian groups. "I felt energized by so many dynamic leaders and wonderful activists all over the state. I called the [NGLTF] office and described my trip to Roseburg yesterday; driving along past farms, then you turn a corner, and there's a gay and lesbian center." The challenge is to find ways for all the different parts of the state and the community to be actively involved. "The referendum provides the impetus for groups to get together. Everyone's looking around for someone to have a plan. We have to develop our own plan. Individuals and organizations have to talk and argue, and I don't think there will be much arguing. The meetings this weekend were a beginning. They brought people together and began to build the trust for talking."

Vaid also was impressed with the amount of support gays and lesbians have from the non-gay community in Oregon. "Gays and lesbians don't live in a ghetto here, but as neighbors, as part of a community. I felt that especially listening to the gays and lesbians from rural areas. They're not always friendly with their neighbors, but the most important thing we can do is communicate on a personal level with other people, communicate the beauty and joy of who we are. That's what will defeat the Right in the long run."



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