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Bob's Your Everything

From weddings to digital rectal exams, a local performer does it all



By Alice Levitt [11.12.08]

Burlington is called a “city,” but sometimes it feels like a small town. On election day, the gentleman answering your questions also has his name on the ballot. And didn’t you see him running the games between innings at Centennial Field last summer? Could that be him again hosting karaoke at the St. Johns Club? Standing on the receiving line at the UVM medical school graduation? Surely, that bespectacled drag queen at Higher Ground must be someone else?

Or not.

They're all Bob Bolyard, a 52-year-old Burlington resident who wears an uncommon number of hats, even though he hasn't had a full-time job in years. To Bolyard, "multitasking" doesn't mean answering phones while tweaking a spreadsheet in Excel. But it could mean bumming a ride from his karaoke gig to his next stint at Fletcher Allen, then walking down the street (he hasn't driven in 11 years) to Centennial Field for his biggest stage of the night.

Sitting down for an interview next to the St. Johns Club bar on a recent Friday afternoon, Bolyard admits he's not completely at ease being the subject of a story. "I don't draw attention to myself," he explains. "I don't really like it." True, there's nothing externally attention-grabbing about this middle-aged man in jeans and a red overshirt.

Bolyard is preparing for his weekly karaoke gig at the Central Avenue social club, which began as the St. Jean Baptiste Club, a meeting place for French-Canadian mill workers. It now hosts a broad cross-section of the neighborhood, most of them over 40. Bolyard's Friday night party is in its seventh year — the longest-running karaoke night in the Burlington area, he says. For four years prior, he ran a similar event at Burlington's roundly mourned gay club, 135 Pearl. In his view, "The main difference between here and Pearl's is, I don't hear a lot of 'Baby Got Back' here."

Whether they're doing their renditions of Sir Mix-a-Lot or Petula Clark, Bolyard likes to help others grab the spotlight. "I don't sing as much as other hosts. I want other people to get to sing," he says, noting that he often sees participants come alive on stage: "Whether it's the drudgery of their jobs or they're beaten down at home, here they can express themselves and be free and walk off feeling good about themselves. I call it karaoke therapy."

He may let others enjoy their star turns at the mike, but this born performer doesn't *always* shun the limelight. Many Vermonters know Bolyard primarily as Amber LeMay, founder of the House of LeMay [1], a drag quartet that's strutted and wisecracked its way through a cable-access show, live performances and, most recently, a movie. What began 12 years ago as a 40th birthday performance by Bolyard and his longtime housemate Michael Hayes (a.k.a. Margaurite LeMay), with singing, comedy and some wigs, got legs that night when Hayes' sister Nancy and Bolyard's best friend Syndi Zook took the stage. The women introduced a complex backstory for Amber and Margaurite LeMay, involving their home life at the Hot Damn Trailer Park in "Beaver Pond, Vermont."

Since that night in 1996, the LeMays' world has expanded to include Johnnie McLaughlin ("foreign exchange student" Lucybelle, the sisters' cousin from Mississippi); Michael Glidden (Liza Little, the one with the comic dentition); and musical accompanist Craig Hilliard. With a revolving cast of associates and hangers-on, the LeMays are the Wu Tang Clan of local drag performance. Bolyard says he's deeply indebted to his friends, stressing, "Without them I couldn't do half of what I do, and not necessarily just the LeMay half."

The "LeMay half" of Bolyard's alliance with Hayes, McLaughlin and the others recently got a new shot of publicity. *Slingbacks and Syrup* [2], a documentary on the history of the LeMay phenomenon, premiered at October's Vermont International Film Festival [3]. For director Russell Dreher, who commuted from New York to film LeMay events and conduct interviews, it was a hefty labor of love. Dreher financed the film himself, and during the editing process, he lost his job and was diagnosed with cancer.

Dreher eventually emerged with a clean bill of health and a finished film, which is currently for sale on the LeMays' website. He says other festivals have shown interest, including one in Canada that he prefers

not to name yet. For his part, Bolyard says, “It’s so cool to have something chronicling the last 15 years in my life.”

Has he ever had ambitions of acting professionally? Bolyard shrugs. “I did one show with Vermont [Repertory Theatre] in their last season. I always thought it would be too much work.” He describes the House of LeMay as “a hobby. Some people spend money on golf or hunting. We spend it on LeMay.”



When someone has half a dozen or so jobs, it’s a wonder he has time for hobbies. Bolyard’s paying gigs take him from the stage to the examination room. Twelve years ago, he joined a new program at the UVM College of Medicine [4] as a “standardized patient” — someone trained to act the role of a patient in various scenarios medical students need to practice before they’re turned loose on actual sick people. “I was basically a human model,” Bolyard recalls. “The instructor demonstrated on me and I said, ‘Ouch.’” Today, he says, “We’re more instructors than models.”

Standardized patients instruct first-year students in bedside manner and assess their progress, confronting them with situations that range from taking a basic health history to dealing with domestic-partner abuse or end-of-life counseling.

And someone has to help future doctors practice the dreaded digital rectal exam. Though it’s far from his favorite thing, Bolyard says, a free prostate check can come in handy: “One time in my first couple of years,

a doctor was doing the digital rectal exam and he said he felt something out of the ordinary. Next year a student felt something that he didn't think was supposed to be there." Though follow-up revealed nothing serious, Bolyard joshes, "That's my health care under George W. Bush."

Cate Nicholas, director of UVM's Standardized Patient Program [5], says Bolyard is "great at this. He's easygoing, and he really cares and is hardworking and has a little bit of actor in him."

More than a little bit of educator, too — the Lima, Ohio, native comes from a family of teachers, though he always promised himself he wouldn't follow that path, he says. When it comes to schooling med students, Bolyard adds, "I love doing that job. It's personally so fulfilling — people have dreams and goals and don't know how to get there, and I can help them."

Nicholas says that at the med school, Bolyard "has deep roots, if you will; he gives 100 percent of himself." Besides attending every graduation, he shows up at "the white-coat ceremony where the students officially get their white coats," and another ceremony dedicated to those who have donated their bodies to medicine.

While Bolyard gives his presence and his patience to the med students, he gives his voice and organizational skills to baseball. As the Lake Monsters [6] geared up for their 2008 season, Syndi Zook, executive director of Burlington's Lyric Theatre [7], received an email asking if she knew an "outgoing, fun and spontaneous" emcee for the team's half-time activities. Zook didn't hesitate to recommend her pal Bolyard. "I played baseball for nine years as a kid," he recalls. "I played right field and batted ninth. Growing up in the country with very few social opportunities, it was great. Or maybe I just liked being with the boys," he adds coyly.

Last summer Bolyard sang “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” and hosted kids’ contests on the field for a crowd of up to 5000 fans. He also reached out to one fan in particular: LeMay chronicler Russell Dreher. “I don’t remember if it was during radiation or after surgery, but one night Bob called me from the game,” Dreher remembers. “He wanted me to hear the whole game. He kept the phone on him until it was done.”

A more recent addition to Bolyard’s 10-foot resume is his promotional and party-planning job as coordinator of Burlington’s annual South End Art Hop. “I was needing another income source. That’s what I call it — not a job, an income source,” he says. Finding the South End Arts and Business Association’s [8] employment ad listed only on Craigslist, he “thought it must have been a scam,” but he was assured the position was real. Though Bolyard didn’t consider himself the ideal candidate, his job-hopping has taught him to learn fast: “I’ve become the guy who knows the answer, and if I don’t, I know who does,” he says. “I’m also an idea person. My job is part organization, part promotion and part inspiration.”

Given his near-ubiquity around Burlington, is it any surprise to find Bolyard in politics? The long-time gay activist has served as head of Pride Vermont [9] and Vermont Gay Social Alternatives [10], as well as promoting and organizing for RU12? “That’s how I spent my forties,” he says. “My unofficial title was Mr. Gay Vermont.” For 13 years, Bolyard and the other LeMays have produced the Winter Is a Drag Ball [11] to benefit the Vermont People with AIDS Coalition [12]. The next one is scheduled for Valentine’s Day 2009 at Higher Ground; last year, a crowd of nearly 900 showed up to Time Warp for a cause.

In his capacity as matriarch of the House of LeMay, Bolyard helped create the League of Drag Queen Voters [13] to bring attention to this year’s pivotal election. Last summer, postcards bearing the legend “Don’t Blow it, VOTE” made it as far as Provincetown, where the ladies of LeMay handed them out to sun-seeking vacationers.

Bolyard's civic bent brought him to the role of Inspector of Elections for Ward 3 in Burlington. At his first presidential primary this year, he was particularly struck by one first-time voting story: "Four women who were over 60 came in together to vote," he recalls. "One woman told me that it was her friend's first time. I asked why, and she said that her husband hadn't let her vote and that she'd been busy with the kids and never felt smart enough, but she wanted to come out for Hillary." Bolyard snapped a photo.

Interviewed just three days after the general election, he said he'd also assisted new voters "who couldn't read or speak English. Democracy wasn't just handed to them. It brought tears to my eyes."

Last Tuesday's election had other personal rewards for Bolyard: He's a newly minted Justice of the Peace. In a previous run several years ago, he was the only one of 15 Democrats who didn't win the office; this year, he came in 10th. A Justice of the Peace is a notary public, sits on the Board of Civil Authority, and can perform marriages and civil unions. "I'm hoping there will be opportunities to do same-sex marriages," Bolyard muses. "People have asked me, 'Will Amber or Bob be doing it?' I think I'll let them pick. It's their day."

In his Quentin Crisp-like existence, Bolyard deals with people from all walks of life, from doctors to baseball fans to artists to septuagenarian voters. Some would say he inspires them. "I am proud to say that Bob Bolyard has been my BFF for 20 years," says Zook. "I know some people have a name for that and it rhymes with 'bag,' but that's fine with me. Bob brings out the best in others," she adds. "Instead of saying, 'Do it this way,' he confidently does his own work so well that you can't help but rise to the challenge of performing with him."

From Bolyard's point of view, he's just a guy who's had a lot of opportunities. And it's his eye for unusual prospects that's made him a

jack-of-all-trades for the new millennium. “If I can encourage others to take the opportunity, I like to,” he says. “A lot of people just don’t.”